

Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy

INTER-RELIGIOUS PRACTICES AND SAINT VENERATION IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

KHIDR/KHIZR FROM THE MIDDLE EAST TO SOUTH ASIA

Edited by Michel Boivin and Manoël Pénicaud



Inter-religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World

Inter-religious Practices and Saint Veneration in the Muslim World studies the immortal saint Khidr/Khizr, a mysterious prophet and popular multi-religious figure and Sufi master venerated across the Muslim world.

Focusing on the religious figure of Khidr/Khizr and the practice of religion from the Middle East to South Asia, the chapters offer a multidisciplinary analysis. The book addresses the plurality in the interpretation of Khizr and underlines the unique character of the figure, whose main characteristics are kept by Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Sikhs. Chapters examine vernacular Islamic piety and intercommunal religious practices and highlight the multiple ways through which Khidr/Khizr allows a conversation between different religious cultures. Furthermore, Khidr/Khizr is a most significant case study for deciphering the complex dialectic between the universal and the local. The contributors also argue that Khidr/Khizr played a leading role in the process of translating a religious tradition into the other, in incorporating him through an association with other sacred characters.

Bringing together the different worship practices in countries with a very different cultural and religious background, the study includes research from the Balkans to the Punjabs in Pakistan and in India. It will be of interest to researchers in History, Anthropology, Sociology, Comparative Religious Studies, History of Religion, Islamic Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, South Asian Studies, and Southeast European Studies.

Michel Boivin is the former Director of the Centre for South Asian Studies, National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris. He is currently a member of the Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies (CESAH), previously known as the Centre for South Asian Studies (CEIAS). Historian and anthropologist, he devotes his research to South Asia, especially the Sindhicate area, straddling Pakistan and India, and Director of the Centre for Social Sciences, Karachi, Pakistan. His previous publications include *Devotional Islam in South Asia* (2015, co-edited with Remy Delage), also published by Routledge.

Manoël Pénicaud is Research Fellow at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), France. He is also a member of the former Institute of European Mediterranean and Comparative Ethnology (IDEMEC), now renamed as Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology (IDEAS), Aix-Marseille University, France. His research focuses on Pilgrimages Studies, cult of saints, shared holy places, interreligious dialogue, visual anthropology, and museology.

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Contributors

Michel Boivin is the former Director of the Centre for South Asian Studies, National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris. He is currently a member of the Centre for South Asian and Himalayan Studies (CESAH), previously known as the Centre for South Asian Studies (CEIAS). Historian and anthropologist, he devotes his research to South Asia, especially the Sindhic area, straddling Pakistan and India. Interested in analysing the intersection between religion and society, during the colonial and independence periods, his work focuses on the sharing of patterns and sites between different Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh persuasions, especially through the mediation of material culture. His last book published in 2020 is titled *The Sufi Paradigm and the Makings of a Vernacular Knowledge in Colonial India: The Case of Sindh (1851–1928)*.

Thomas Dähnhardt got his first (BA) degree in Modern Oriental Languages (Hindi and Urdu) from Venice University and was awarded a PhD in Religious Studies (South Asia) from SOAS (London) with a thesis on cross-religious spiritual affiliations in the Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Sufi order in 19th to early 20th century India. After working for several years as Research Fellow at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies in the UK, he is currently Associate Professor at the Department of Asian and North African Studies at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Besides teaching Hindi and Urdu language and literature, his research interests touch on intercommunal Hindu-Muslim relations in colonial and post-colonial South Asia as well as Sufism in the Indo-Pak cultural environment. He is the author of a volume on *Change and Continuity in Indian Sufism* (2001) and a *Grammar of Urdu Language for Italian Students* (2012) and has written numerous articles on Sufism and spiritual symbolism in the Muslim environment of South Asia.

Hugh Talat Halman is Associate Professor at Central Michigan University. His research and teaching are on the theory, practice, culture, and history of Sufism. He also teaches a variety of courses on Islamic topics and an Introduction to World Religions. Among his publications is *Where the Two Seas Meet: The Qur'anic Story of al-Khidr and Moses in Sufi Commentaries as a Model of Spiritual Guidance* (2013).

Zahida Rehman Jatt is a PhD candidate at the University of Victoria, Wellington in New Zealand. She is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sindh (Pakistan). Jatt has authored many academic articles and attended several international conferences.

Sibel Kocaer completed her PhD at SOAS in 2015, and currently she is Assistant Professor at the Department of Translation and Interpreting at Bandırma Onyedi Eylül University. Her research interests include textual studies, history, cultural studies, and translation studies. She contributed a chapter with the title “The Notion of Erenler in the *Divan-ı Şeyh Mehmed Çelebi (Hızırname)*” in Lloyd Ridgeon ed. *Javanmardi: The Ethics and Politics of Persianate Perfection* (2018).

Anna Krasnowolska worked at the Department of Iranian Studies of the Jagiellonian University, Cracow, Poland for 17 years as its head and now he is retired. Her fields of interest include Persian epics (narrative structures, oral origins); Iranian mythology and folklore; and modern literature and culture of Persianate societies. Her publications include *Some Key Figures of Iranian Calendar Mythology*, Kraków 1998; *Mythes, croyances populaires et symbolique animale dans la littérature persane*, 2012; *Historia Iranu* (History of Iran), 2010 (co-authorship and editing); and many articles on Persian literature, culture, and folklore.

Sara Kuehn is Lecturer at the Department of Islamic-Theological Studies, University of Vienna, and works at the interdisciplinary juncture of (art) history, anthropology, religious, and cultural studies. She is the author of several publications on visual-material culture, anthropology, religion, and art history and is currently exploring the visual culture of Sufism in Europe in a new book, provisionally titled *Vision and Visuality in Western European Sufism*.

Kamran Kumbher holds a PhD in History and Civilisations from the School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) Paris. He has participated in several international conferences and is currently preparing the publication of his research with the title *Practising Hinduism in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Devotion and the Politics of Untouchability in Ramdev Pir’s Tradition of Sindh*.

Norig Neveu is a historian, Research Fellow at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), and member of the Institute of Research and Study on the Arab and Muslim Worlds (IREMAM), Aix Marseille University. She is a specialist in Middle East Studies, Ottoman History, and Pilgrimages Studies, mainly in Jordan.

Manoël Pénicaud is an anthropologist and Research Fellow at the National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS). He is a member of the former Institute of European Mediterranean and Comparative Ethnology (IDEMEC), now renamed as Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology (IDEAS), Aix-Marseille University. He is specialised in pilgrimage studies, cult of saints, shared holy places, interreligious dialogue, visual anthropology, and museology. His last book published in 2020 is titled *Louis Massignon. Le “catholique*

musulman". He is also one of the curators of the international touring exhibition *Shared Sacred Sites*.

Yogesh Snehi is Assistant Professor at Ambedkar University in Delhi (India). His major teaching and research interests focus on popular culture. He tends to comprehend the social formation of Punjab through an understanding of popular Sufi shrines and investigate the long-term processes of region formation, debates on identities, and growth of communalism. His research provides a methodology to theorise the "popular" and appreciates the organic relationship between various identities. He has authored many academic publications, including his book *Spatializing Popular Sufi Shrines in Punjab: Dreams, Memories, Territoriality*, co-published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla and Routledge in 2019.

George Tsourous is a social anthropologist and Associate Fellow at the Centre of Ethnographic Studies at the University of Kent. His ethnographic research, funded by the British Academy, involved the investigation of the sociocultural relations between the Christian communities in Jerusalem with a focal point the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. His research interests also include Christian-Muslim relations and the impact of pilgrimage in shared sacred spaces in Israel/Palestine and Egypt.

Samuel Verley is a PhD candidate in History and Anthropology of Religions at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE) and School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS), Paris. His thesis, supervised by Thierry Zarcone and Alexandre Papas, is entitled *The Ordeal of Khidr: An Anthropology of Relations with an Immortal Being in Contemporary Turkey*.

I Surat 18 – Excerpt on Khidr – Khizr

Surat al Kahf (XVIII-60/101), *The Holy Quran*, tr. in English by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, London, Islamic Book Service, 2002 (1st ed. 1928).

60. Behold, Moses said to his attendant, “I will not Give up until I reach the junction of the two Seas or (until) I spend Years and years in travel.”
61. But when they reached The Junction, they forgot (About) their Fish, which took Its course through the sea (Straight) as in a tunnel.
62. When they had passed on (Some distance), Moses said to his attendant: “Bring us Our early meal; truly We have suffered much fatigue At this (stage of) our journey.”
63. He replied: “Sawest thou (What happened) when we Betook ourselves to the rock? I did indeed forget (About) the Fish: none but Satan made me forget to tell (you) about it: It took its course through The sea in a marvellous way!”
64. Moses said: “That was what We were seeking after”: So they went back on their footsteps, following (The path they had come).
65. So they found one of Our servants, on whom We had bestowed Mercy from Ourselves And whom We had taught Knowledge from Our own Presence.
66. Moses said to him: “May I follow thee, on the footing that Thou teach me something of the (Higher) Truth Which thou hast been taught?”
67. (The other) said: “Verily Thou wilt not be able to have patience with me!
68. “And how canst thou Have patience about things About which thy understanding Is not complete?”
69. Moses said: “Thou wilt Find me, if God so will, (Truly) patient: nor shall I Disobey thee in aught.”
70. The other said: “If then Thou wouldst follow me, ask me no questions About anything until I Myself speak to thee Concerning it.”
71. So they both proceeded: Until, when they were in the boat, he scuttled it. Said Moses: “Hast thou Scuttled it in order to drown those in it? Truly a strange thing Hast thou done!”
72. He answered: “Did I not Tell thee that thou canst have no patience with me?”
73. Moses said: “Rebuke me not for forgetting, nor grieve me by raising difficulties in my case.”

2 Surat 18 – Excerpt on Khidr – Khizr

74. Then they proceeded: Until, when they met A young man, he slew him. Moses said: “Hast thou Slain an innocent person Who had slain none? Truly a foul (unheard-of) thing Hast thou done!”
75. He answered: “Did I not Tell thee that thou canst Have no patience with me?”
76. (Moses) said: “If ever I Ask thee about anything After this, keep me not in thy company: then wouldst Thou have received (full) excuse from my side.”
77. Then they proceeded: Until, when they came To the inhabitants of a town, They asked them for food, But they refused them Hospitality. They found there a wall on the point of Falling down, but he Set it up straight. (Moses) said: “If thou Hadst wished, surely thou Couldst have exacted some Recompense for it!”
78. He answered: “This is the parting between me and thee: now will I Tell thee the interpretation of (those things) over which Thou wast unable To hold patience.
79. As for the boat, It belonged to certain Men in dire want: They plied on the water: I but wished to render it Unserviceable, for there was After them a certain king Who seized on every boat By force.
80. As for the youth, His parents were people Of Faith, and we feared That he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to God and man).
81. So we desired that Their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) Better in purity (of conduct) And closer in affection.
82. As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, Orphans, in the town; there was, beneath it, A buried treasure, to which They were entitled; Their father Had been a righteous man: So thy Lord desired that They should attain their age Of full strength and get out Their treasure—a mercy (And favour) from thy Lord. I did it not of my own Accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which Thou wast unable to hold patience.”
83. They ask thee concerning Zul-qarnain. Say, “I will rehearse to you Something of his story.”
84. Verily We established his power on earth, and We gave him The ways and the means To all ends.
85. One (such) way he followed.
86. Until, when he reached The setting of the sun, He found it set In a spring of murky water: Near it he found a People: We said: “O Zul-qarnain! (Thou hast authority,) either to punish them, or to treat them with kindness.”
87. He said: “Whoever doth wrong, Him shall we punish; then Shall he be sent back to his Lord; and He will Punish him with a punishment Unheard-of (before).
88. But whoever believes, and works righteousness, — He shall have a goodly Reward, and easy will be His task as we order it By our command.”
89. Then followed he (another) way.
90. Until, when he came to the rising of the sun, He found it rising on a people for whom We had provided No covering protection Against the sun.
91. (He left them) as they were: We completely understood What was before him.
92. Then followed he (another) way.
93. Until, when he reached (A tract) between two mountains, He found, beneath them, a people Who scarcely understood a word.

94. They said: “O Zul-qarnain! The Gog and Magog (people) Do great mischief on earth: Shall we then render thee Tribute in order that Thou mightest erect a barrier Between us and them?”
95. He said: “(The power) in which My Lord has established me Is better (than tribute): Help me therefore with strength (And labour): I will Erect a strong barrier Between you and them:
96. Bring me blocks of iron.” At length, when he had Filled up the space between the two steep mountain-sides, He said, “Blow (with your bellows)” Then, when he had made It (red) as fire, he said: “Bring me, that I may Pour over it, molten lead.”
97. Thus were they made Powerless to scale it or to dig through it.
98. He said: “This is A mercy from my Lord: But when the promise of my Lord comes to pass, He will make it into dust; And the promise of My Lord is true.”
99. On that day We shall Leave them to surge Like waves on one another: The trumpet will be blown, And We shall collect them All together.
100. And We shall present Hell that day for Unbelievers To see, all spread out.
101. (Unbelievers) whose eyes Had been under a veil From Remembrance of Me, and who had been unable Even to hear.

II Introduction to Khidr-Khizr¹

A Figure of Shared Legacy in a World of Religious Boundaries

Michel Boivin and Manoël Pénicaud

Putting together a volume about a character like Khidr-Khizr is a challenge. All the scholars who are specialised in the Muslim world have heard about al-Khadir, al-Khidr, Khizr, sometimes called Khodr, Khezr, Hızır, or Khwaja Khizr. Nonetheless, it is not easy to give details on the character and to answer the basic questions regarding his identity and status: who was he? What were his achievements? What are the reliable sources for knowing him more? As soon as these issues have been addressed, the first comment that comes to mind is that he is a complex figure. Notwithstanding, the Quran, which is the first source usually quoted in relation to him, clearly states that he is such a mysterious character that he is not named. But it is clearly stated that he is God's servant, to whom "We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge from Our own" (Quran – Surat al-Kahf, 18:65).

According to the Quranic narratives, Musa was going with his servant on a journey to find the *majma' al-bahrayn*, the meeting of the two oceans. But once they reached the place, they realised they had forgotten the dried fish they were taking with them. While they were looking for it, they met a servant of God who, in a number of anecdotes, appears to be much wiser than Musa. Most of the Muslim commentators call the servant of God, al-Khadir, the "Green One," although he is not named in the Quran. From this name, many vernacularised forms will be given to him from the different Muslim cultures where he is worshipped. For example, "Hızır" in Turkey, "Khadir" or "Khodr" in Arabic areas, "Khezr" in Iran, and "Khwaja Khizr" in the Indian subcontinent. This onomastic plurality already reveals the multiplicity of this holy figure across spaces and cultures. In this volume, the methodological bias consists in letting each author use the vernacular appellation of his choice, according to his/her study and fieldwork. The same approach is adopted concerning transliterations from Arabic, Turkish, Farsi, and so on.

State of research and the 2000 turn

Even if scholars have heard about him, it does not mean Khidr/Khizr has been a topic of its own in Orientalism and Social Sciences, although his mysterious aspect has obviously attracted some interest. The first monograph devoted to Khidr/Khizr should nevertheless be the one published by Israel Friedländer (1876–1920) in 1913. Friedländer's book is divided into two main parts: the genesis of Khadir's

legend and the Mohammedan versions of Khadir. In the first part, Friedländer examines the Greek, the Babylonian, and the Syrian legends, before turning to the Quran. In the second part, he includes two main Persian authors, Firdawsi (c. 940–c. 1020) and Nizami (1141–1209). In the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, there are at least three notices devoted to the figure, and already it is a clue on its elusive aspect. The most important is titled “al-Khadir (al-Khidr/Khizr)” and it is divided into two parts: 1. In the Quran and oriental legends; 2. Development in Islam. The author is the famous Dutch orientalist Arent Jan Wensinck (1882–1939). For him, al-Khidr/Khizr is “a popular figure who plays a prominent part in legend and story” (IV, 902).

Furthermore, interestingly, the *Encyclopedia of Islam* provides two other papers on the vernacular worship of al-Khidr/Khizr: one in Turkey and the other in South Asia. The first notice is on “Khidr/Khizr-Ilyas (Hidrellez in Turkish)” by Pertev Naili Boratav (1907–1998), a Turkish folklorist, and the second is titled “Khwaja Khidr (or Khizr in India)” and it is authored by Mansel Longworth Dames (1850–1922), a British officer in India.² Boratav observes that Khidir-Ilyas is the name of a popular festival in Turkish tradition, which is celebrated in the spring, whose dates of 5–6 May correspond to the feast day of Saint George (V, 5). Khwaja Khidr/Khizr is, in many parts of India, identified with a river-god or spirit of wells and streams (IV, 908). The author also claimed he is a reminiscence of Matsya, the fish avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu. In both cases, the vernacular al-Khidr/Khizr received only a few pages but in both cases, he is associated with non-Muslim sacred figures.

Let us mention three other scholars from the first part of the twentieth century who studied the veneration of the Khidr/Khizr in the Middle East and South Asia. Two scholars were focusing specifically on his associations and identifications with Biblical and Christian characters such as Elijah and St. George. The first is the British Frederick Hasluck (1878–1920) whose pioneering work first published in 1929 explored the attendance of sanctuaries by the faithful of different religions in the declining Ottoman Empire (Hasluck 2000). The second one is the French orientalist and islamologist Louis Massignon (1883–1962) who first published in 1955 a significant article on the correspondence between Khadir and Elijah (Massignon 2009). Meanwhile, Ananda Coomaraswamy published in 1935 a paper on the Persian and South Asian figure of Khwaja Khizr. Interestingly, he used not only literary sources but also visual sources. In fact, his article is mainly based on Mughal miniatures and their Persian inspiration (Coomaraswamy 1934).

At the time when Wensinck published his paper, only a few academic studies had been published on al-Khidr/Khizr, mostly focusing on Arabic literature, and related to the Orientalist approach. Two milestones have been published since then. In 2000, Patrick Franke published the first ever academic study of Khizr as a focus for worldwide Muslim piety. Using material in Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, he observed the veneration of Khizr is spread under different shapes, but he does not investigate further to the East than Afghanistan. Franke’s work is impressive in his attempt to cover a real comprehensive survey of Khwaja Khizr in Islamic written sources, from the beginning of Islam, namely the Quran, to the modern times, with Islamic scholars such as Mawdudi or Sayyid Qutub.³

The main issue addressed by Franke is why was the veneration of Khidr/Khizr never transformed into a coherent religion solely devoted to him. It is mainly due to the fact that the Ulamas never agreed on the issue of the nature of Khidr/Khizr. Briefly put, was he a prophet or a saint? The question is related to the eternal life that God was supposed to have bestowed on him. Recently, Mawdudi found an alternative answer stating that Khidr/Khizr's status was that of an angel, while Sayyid Qutub simply removed Khidr/Khizr from the Quranic text. By the way, Franke is the first scholar to address the issue of Khidr/Khizr in Shia sources. He scrutinised how the Shias have framed the relations between al-Khidr/Khizr and a number of key characters of their doctrine, including the Hidden Imam, Ali, and *ahl al-bayt*.

Another unknown aspect of Khidr/Khizr is that he has been used as a pattern of antinomianism. Franke refers to a number of Sufis who claimed that the figure of Khidr/Khizr enabled the infringement of *sharia*. For example, Umar Muhammad al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234) gave his own interpretation of the meeting of Musa and Khidr/Khizr. He stated that the friendship of God, or *walaya*, allows not to respect the precepts of the common Islamic law. For another contemporary Sufi, Ahmad b. Umar al-Qurtubi (d. 1258), it is his very status of the prophet that makes Khidr/Khizr an antinomian pattern for sainthood. In fact, such an intellectual construction was related to the conception according to which reality is made of two realms: the *zahir*, what is outward and visible, but superficial; and the *batin*, the inside, invisible, but finally the ultimate reality. The famous Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328) strongly criticised this interpretation of Khidr/Khizr as a pattern of antinomianism, since he identified it as a Shia originated interpretation (Franke 2000: 315–316).

In 2013, another book was published by Hugh Talat Halman. Its scope is not as broad as Franke's one since he focuses on the material used in Sufi commentaries. Nonetheless, a number of issues he addresses cross those addressed by Franke, especially those related to the status of Khidr/Khizr. Halman mostly explores how Khidr/Khizr was a "paradigm for the possibility of sainthood" (Halman 2013: 13). For him, by interpreting Khidr/Khizr as a guide to saints and spiritual masters, interpreters have read this Quranic narrative as validating the social structures of sainthood. Notwithstanding, Halman identifies three layers in the figure of Khwaja Khidr/Khizr, according to the different corpora he has studied. The first layer is made of works that focus on the Quran, the *hadiths* and their commentaries. The second corpus includes the works introducing him as a spiritual master. The third layer is Khwaja Khidr/Khizr as he is depicted in the *Iskandarnama* (Alexander Romance).

Drawing on Halman, the inter-textuality between the Quran and the *Iskandarnama* obviously deserves interest (Halman 2013: 13): how were the Quranic figure and that of the *Iskandarnama* merged into a single figure? Is it possible to firmly establish why the earliest samples of Khidr/Khizr's iconography refer to the mythological figure of Iskander, instead of the Quranic servant of Musa? Most of the Persian versions of the *Iskandarnama* relate the story of Iskander with Khidr/Khizr. It is mentioned by Nizami, as well as by Ferdawsi, but amazingly, it lacks in the version of Amir Khusraw Dehlavi (1253–1325), the first major version born in

India. Written around 1202, Nizami's version of the story of Iskander is the most explicit and it follows a main pattern: on his way for reaching Rum, Iskandar visits the Land of Darkness in search of the Fountain of Life, with Khidr/Khizr as a guide (Hanaway 2006). The results are always the same: Khidr/Khizr drinks from the spring and becomes immortal and Iskander loses his way and never finds the elixir. From the fifteenth century onwards, it is noteworthy that the earliest iconography from Persia and the Ottoman Empire depicts in different scenarios Iskander with Khidr/Khizr, while in later representations, for example, those of the Mughal Empire from the sixteenth century onwards, Khidr/Khizr is alone and Iskander has been withdrawn.

Already, Khidr/Khizr appears as a much more complex figure in literature and iconography, at the crossroads of two figures: the Quranic figure of the servant of Musa, who has no proper name and is called *'abdan*, or servant, and the mythological figure of Iskander, Alexander, as drawn in the Persian literature. Consequently, from the earliest times, Khidr/Khizr is a figure who is conducive to being incorporated into an array of traditions. As a matter of fact, the first narrative of Alexander's epic was composed in Greek, then translated into Syriac and Persian. Needless to say, it would be of great interest to scrutinise the literary and iconographical development in European mediaeval literature. Notwithstanding, such an investigation would be too far away from the scope of the present volume, which is restricted, so to say, to two geo-cultural areas: the Middle East (including the Balkans) and South Asia.

Framing Khidr/Khizr as an object of social sciences

Despite the development of recent studies on Khidr/Khizr,⁴ one will observe these works focus on classical literature mostly based on Arabic and to some extent Persian material. As we highlighted before, the first step of studies was conducted in the wake of Orientalism. The two recent monographs published on Khidr/Khizr focus on the Arabic-speaking world, but the geographical scope of his cult can be enlarged, including the Balkans, Turkey, and Iran, in other words to make the Middle East. This conception also follows the claim that there was a classical formation in the Islamic world that was born and spread from this geographical area. Outside of this, there is the peripheral Muslim world, of which South Asia was a part. For a long time, peripheral Islam was often represented as a corrupted form of centred Islam, which means Islamic productions expressed in Arabic and by Arabs or Arabised populations.

In the case of Khidr/Khizr, this centre-periphery dialectics is interesting since one of the most peculiar aspects of this figure was its ability to be identified with figures belonging to other religions all over the Muslim world, inserted inside different religious cultures. The imbalance between the classical representation of Khidr/Khizr, expressed by the central Muslim lands, is perfectly illustrated in how the *Encyclopedia of Islam* addressed the issue. In its defence, the *Encyclopedia* was but mirroring the state of research, and it is obvious that almost no academic study had been published yet on the "peripheral" Khidr/Khizr. Furthermore, among



Figure 0.1 Khizr guiding Iskander to reach the Fountain of Life.

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the numerous and vast areas of the Muslim world that have escaped the attention of scholars, there is, for example, the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, it seems relevant to propose a comparative approach between the Middle East and South Asia, and here the cult of Khidr/Khizr, hereby mostly known as Khwaja Khizr, is much spread. However, the present volume reflects only a preliminary approach and its purpose is only to help identify the main similarities and differences between the representations and the rituals devoted to Khidr/Khizr.

This first step will be achieved in opening the study of Khwaja Khidr/Khizr to the large field of social sciences. But what does it mean? The ambition of this volume is to be interdisciplinary. It involves specialists in Islamology, History, Anthropology, Sociology, Literature and Poetry, etc. in order to cross multidimensional approaches and to better understand the complexity of such an elusive mystical figure in different cultural contexts. In implementing such methodologies, it plans to include vernacular piety as well as to focus on the society in evaluating the role played by Khidr/Khizr's veneration in the social construction. Obviously, studies devoted to Khidr/Khizr will straddle with other fields, such as pilgrimage studies and studies devoted to the shared sacred spaces (Albera & Couroucli 2012). As a matter of fact, the association of Khidr/Khizr with non-Muslim figures is one of the main features of the vernacular Khidr/Khizr.

Another main issue is to be addressed: what is the relevance to focus on a figure, on a character, in a time when social sciences are most keen to think in terms of concepts, belonging to given geographical areas? A figure that deserves interest is supposed to embody a number of aspects pertaining to a culture and a society. In the case of Khidr/Khizr, one should add he is a unique figure in the context of Islam and the Muslim world. No other character is so mysterious, flexible, and spread all over the Muslim world, with this ambiguous identity allowing other religions to assimilate their own figures with him, and vice versa. Another exception in relation to Khidr/Khizr is that he has been given the status of the prophet by some authors. He should be the sole figure in Islam who has this claim, although it is not accepted by all Muslims. However, this element makes him unique and distinct from any other type of sainthood and sacrality in a Muslim context, be it related to the Sufi saints or to the Shia Imams. This specific status questions about what is the meaning of this ambivalence.

In any case, the complexity of the character of Khidr/Khizr makes it difficult to situate his study in a defined disciplinary field. However, the most characteristic feature that can be found in the different cultures that have appropriated him is that he always favours a sharing, or a meeting, between these different religious cultures. On the other hand, researchers distinguish several scenarios, situations, and processes by which such sharing and encounters take place. Given their own training in the social sciences, and given the data they have to deal with, one observes the diversity of concepts, terms, and expressions that are used to account for them. That said, this terminological and conceptual fluctuation can be noted in what can be termed the field of interreligious encounters. Work in this area has led to the criticism of long-standing notions, such as the term syncretism, to which we shall return. Finally, the question posed by this volume is to know what works devoted

to Khird/Khizr bring to this problem of the interreligious encounter: in other words, they allow to renew this questioning by focusing on the various modalities of integration implemented by these religious cultures. However, we should not underestimate the factors external to these religious cultures, starting with social and political power relations, social structures or injunctions resulting from the locality, and the space.

Why is Khidr/Khizr so mysterious? It is not only because of his multiple guises, but rather because the unseen, the unknown is his field of expertise. Not only a current association that is found in most of the involved cultures is with nature, more precisely in the cycle of nature, especially at the time of its rebirth, when winter is over. This relationship between Khidr/Khizr convinced many scholars to see him as a new expression of ancient divinities related to the worship of Nature's elements, starting with animism. But how does it come to be associated with other sacred figures from such diverse religious cultures?

The focus of this book is why and how a figure such as Khidr/Khizr can be found with shared attributes from the Middle East to South Asia, namely in two faraway geographical and cultural areas. Before going further in investigating the comparative issue, it must be recognised that there is much more work on Khidr/Khizr in the Middle East than in South Asia. The approach to Khidr/Khizr in the Middle East is multidisciplinary, but it should be noted that art historians have made an important contribution to these studies. Among them, Sara Wolper's work is particularly significant, knowing that she combines the use of written sources with "built" sources, to such an extent that the conclusions she draws from her analyses can serve as a first step in contextualising the comparative approach pursued in this book.

In an article published some years back, Sara Wolper highlighted the role played by Khidr/Khizr in the "conversion of sacred sanctuaries" in Anatolia (Wolper 2000). She sought to understand why so many sites, particularly shared sanctuaries, became associated with Khidr/Khizr. Drawing on Frederick Hasluck's theory of building conversion in Asia Minor, she also accepted his statement that sacred sites were often transferred from one religious tradition to another through an intermediary figure Hasluck termed "a noncommittal cultic figure" (Wolper 2000: 309). For Wolper, another main issue is to understand how Khidr/Khizr is associated with more than one saint. The "process of association" is to be located in a specific historical context. Khidr/Khizr appeared in Anatolia when the area was submitted to both a process of Islamisation and of Turkification and at the political level, it was marked by the declining Byzantine Empire and the rapidly dividing Seljuk state. In this unstable context, Khidr/Khizr allowed the local communities to make a link between different figures belonging to other religious traditions.

In another paper devoted to Khidr/Khizr she published more recently, Wolper focuses on "translation" instead of "conversion," while her purpose is still to understand why and how buildings have been connected to Khidr/Khizr. But this time, however, she intends to address the issue on the basis of the case of the Syrian

Orthodox monastery of Mar Behnam, near Mosul in Iraq. As a matter of fact, in the built complex, there is an octagonal mausoleum named Maqam al-Khidr/Khizr, literally the place of Khidr/Khizr. Furthermore, there is an Uyghur inscription dedicated to Khidr/Khizr on the frieze of the arch over the tomb of Mar Benham. According to Wolper, this inscription is possibly the only one found in a Christian structure to name Khidr/Khizr (Wolper 2015: 388). Among different assumptions, she favours the one that makes the “act of translation” arguing for “one-to-one correspondences between different religious figures, usually attributed to local beliefs” (Wolper 2015: 389).

Wolper states there are three Khidr/Khizr traits that make him a particularly significant figure in establishing and securing sacred space during periods of change. First, he is frequently paired with other saints and prophets: he is Khidr/Khizr for the Muslims, Elijah for the Jews, and Saint George for the Christians, to quote only a few. Secondly, he is often associated with high places and bodies of water. Thirdly, he is a transformer of landscape (Wolper 2015: 389–390). For example, Khidr/Khizr worked as a translation of Christian saints at a time of great insecurity, such as during the coming of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The association with Khidr/Khizr underlined the falsity and temporality of religious divisions and thus made possible a peaceful life in areas with mixed populations and shifting boundaries.

Finally, beyond the well-known attributes he has such as his undefined status, three assumptions drawn from Sara Wolper’s work look very significant to set up a possible comparison. First are the circumstances of his appearance, both in troubled historical times, mostly during invasions, and moving boundaries, in other words, in times of insecurity for the local populations. Thus, it will be crucial to see if this assumption is relevant in the case of South Asia. Second, Khidr/Khizr is bounded to locality. It means that as an amorphous and/or protean figure, he is able to allow local groups to build bridges between different religious traditions, as well as ethnic groups. Third, Khidr/Khizr is incorporated into different religious traditions through a “process of association,” although Wolper talked of “connection” in the second paper.

Here is obviously the most difficult part of the analysis. Of course, it depends on historical sources, and the methodology displayed by Wolper, especially when she cumulates written and built sources, can be helpful. On the other hand, one can already notice that several different terms have been used in this introduction to name the process that Khidr/Khizr embodies: ambiguity, association, and translation. Other terms are used by the authors of the contributions that made this volume, and it would be beyond the scope of this introduction to deal with the ins and outs that have prevailed in the selection of words. At the moment, it is preferable to underline the fact that the lack of standardisation mirrors the complexity of the process incarnated by the figure of Khidr/Khizr.

What the present volume brings to these complex issues is the result of several statements that are common to all contributors. First, Khidr/Khizr is always associated with nature, especially the renewal of nature that occurs at the end of winter and the beginning of spring. These periods were particularly important for

the agro-pastoral populations that were to dominate when the “great religions” were born and developed. There were therefore annual festivals commemorating this vital renewal of their lives, and because of their vital importance, they were reinterpreted by the new religions. In this respect, it is well known that the date of 25 December chosen to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ coincided with a pre-Christian Roman festival of primary importance: it corresponds to the winter solstice, *Sol Invictus* (the unconquered sun), and it was Pope Liberus who decided in 354 to fix the birth of Jesus on this date. This festival marked the end of the shortening of the days and therefore the moment when they began to lengthen.

It is not impossible that the role of Khidr/Khizr as an agent of renewal, of the rebirth of nature, led to the dates that celebrate him, and also to his association with several sacred figures whose function was similar in other religions. In the arid zone where Khidr/Khizr is worshipped, from the plains of the Tigris and Euphrates to those of the Indus and Ganges, water is the symbol of life, and it appears in the narratives on multiple occasions and in multiple forms: water as a symbol of immortality, Khidr/Khizr as the one who can make rain fall when summoned, as the embodiment of the Vedic god of waters, Varuna, the fish which is his symbol and vehicle. From this primordial function that is associated with Khird/Khizr derives the role he plays in bringing fertility and fecundity. In the same register, in relation to nature, he is considered the patron saint of animals in certain religious cultures. His action is therefore not limited since it extends to all the worlds of nature.

Moreover, another fundamental element that these texts highlight is the role of ferryman that Khidr/Khizr assumes in these religious cultures: he favours passage, transition, transmission, and initiation. Associated with this is the specific knowledge that he possesses, a secret, esoteric, initiatory knowledge that certainly cannot be given to everyone. Khidr/Khizr is, by excellence, the figure of the shadowy, grey areas, where the normative religions have not been able to impose their dogmas, and this is for many reasons. But as a ferryman, his action goes beyond the simple phenomenon of religious conversion, the passage from one religion to another, whether this change concerns people or buildings. He can accompany almost structural changes, such as the transition from the rural to the urban world, from agro-pastoral activities to trade, or, on a more sociological level, the transition from tribal organisation to that of the nation-state.

As put above, the debates on these questions raised by the study of Khidr/Khizr have often crystallised around the naming of the processes of encounter and/or sharing. One of the terms that has been most discussed in this context is undoubtedly that of syncretism. Researchers have gone so far as to devote in-depth articles to it, either to defend its use or, more often, to condemn it. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider these debates, as they bear witness to what is at stake. As put by Glenn Bowman, “It is impossible to avoid the term syncretism when discussing inter-community mixing in shrines” (Bowman 2009: 28). In the context of colonial India, British authors underscored what they called the “syncretism” prevailing in a number of religious communities of India. Usually, the word “syncretism” was

used as a derogatory word for depicting a religious system without consistency, made of mixed elements that were motley. A syncretistic religion could not be a true religion, or a good religion. And most of the time, the British identified those syncretist religions among the low classes: the impure religion was forcibly that of the low classes, which were themselves impure. The debate on the appropriateness of using the term syncretism in the social sciences was clarified in an article published by Tony K. Stewart and Carl Ernst. The main argument they exposed for removing the term syncretism from the social sciences is that “Invocations of syncretism inevitably use the broad strokes of monolithic cultural and religious categories, as opposed to the historically specific forms that would require more subtle and nuanced distinctions. The argument reduces complex forms to simplistic terms that have but a dubious analytic value and which serve to instantiate existing stereotypes” (Stewart & Ernst 2003: 586).

Two years before, Tony K. Stewart had published an article which is one of the most outstanding contributions to the debate on encounters between religions. He claimed to “reconceive the nature of the religious encounter that characterises the region in this pre- and early colonial period” (Stewart 2001: 261). For him, the encounter emphasises the local, creative efforts of individuals trying to make sense of an environment that does not always cooperate. He states that “translation in this context defines a way that religious practitioners seek ‘equivalence’ among their counterparts.” Enduring frameworks of religious organisations and interpretation eventually grounded traditions as we understand them today in their regional forms. Finally, Stewart concludes that “the search for equivalence in the encounter of religions – when understood through the translation models we have characterised as literal, refractive, dynamic, and metaphoric – is an attempt to be understood, to make oneself understood in a language not always one’s own” (Stewart 2001: 263).

Another convincing attempt to go beyond the notion of syncretism is the theory of translation, which has been expounded by several authors who specialised in different fields, from art history to literature. In his book *Objects of Translation*, Finbarr B. Flood pointed out that, from the very first paragraph, he situates his approach in an ideological field, and not just a scientific one, by joining the list of detractors of the all-too-famous theory of the clash of civilisations developed by Samuel Huntington. The aim of Finbarr B. Flood is to explore and “historicise” the dialectic of otherness and identity, continuity and change, confrontation and co-option, which have given shape to transcultural encounters, and the processes by which they have conditioned, and have been conditioned in turn by diplomatic, warlike, and mercantile exchanges (Flood 2009: 4). To this end, the author argues that it is necessary to rehabilitate the event in the social sciences, in an era dominated by works centred on the processes, which often lead to a reification of the subject. He also advocates the framework of the “long term,” which is the only way to identify these periods of “cultural shift” on which he wishes to focus. The author then recalls that the dominant theory was developed in the context of nationalism and that it is still a major issue in the political discourse in India and Pakistan.

The structure of the book

This volume aims to make a new contribution to these debates on interreligious exchange not only by focusing on the figure of Khidr-Khizr but also by highlighting a comparative approach between several distinct cultural areas. Notwithstanding, the attempt to implement a comparative approach implies dealing with a number of difficulties. Firstly, how to organise the book? Through dividing it following the two involved areas, thus on a geographical and/or a cultural basis? Or is it more relevant to follow the chronological line? Or combining both? Another solution could be provided by a thematic distribution of the chapters. The latest appears to be the most relevant regarding the main purpose: to initiate a comparative approach between two distinct areas, the Middle East and South Asia. Consequently, the book is divided into two broad parts: representations, including literature and iconography, then places with beliefs and rituals. We are quite aware it can sound like a very basic structure, but we are simultaneously convinced that in this preliminary step, it is more appropriate since it will be able to provide relevant grounds for identifying similarities and distinctions.

In that perspective, some echoes and resonances will be indicated between different chapters, in order to show continuities and variations. Furthermore, we are also quite aware of the lack in the book, even if it is an initial step for a comparative study of Khidr/Khizr. Notwithstanding, the volume brings together 14 contributions that indicate above all else the complexity of the character. One of the methods that can certainly partially circumscribe this pitfall is the multidisciplinary approach, a diversity that is reflected in the contributions, and still another way is to take samples from different countries. Finally, we can also highlight the multiplicity of approaches in terms of fields, ranging from literature to history, anthropology, and sociology of religions.

Consequently, the first part is devoted to literature and iconography. This approach includes several languages such as Arabic, Sindhi, or Turkish. The first two contributions focus on Arab literary sources, but in two very different registers. Talat Halman, whose contribution opens the volume, devotes himself to the study of Khidr in the scriptural sources of Islam, starting with the Quran and the *hadiths*, and then in Tafsir. This contribution highlights both continuities and discontinuities. The next two contributions transport the reader from the Arabic-speaking world to South Asia. The chapter composed by Sibel Kocaer testifies to a first appropriation of the figure beyond the Arab world. Hizr, in the Turkish milieu, however, takes on multiple identities.

They also complement each other, insofar as Thomas Dähnhardt's one proposes to situate the figure of Khizr in the general context of the Indian subcontinent. The following chapter leaves the field of literature to introduce Khizr into the field of iconography. Michel Boivin's chapter allows to observe the importance of the circulation of models between the Middle East and South Asia, and also how local cultures have reconstructed a representation of Khizr that is compatible with their vernacular culture. The last contribution of this first part by Kamran Kumbher proposes a focus on the devotional literature in Sindhi, and he highlights how through

the “mediation” of the Indus River, the figure was associated with a local divinity, named Uderolal or Jhulelal. Finally, the first part of this volume already allows some characteristics of Khidr/Khizr to be established, such as its association with the aquatic world, its ability to be associated with local sacred figures, and the sharing of its worship between different religions, albeit under different names.

The second part of the volume abandons the literary and iconographic fields to focus on sites, beliefs, and rituals. Here again, a range of approaches is deployed, and the studies focus on a diversity of countries belonging both to the Balkans, the Middle East, including a comparative approach between Iranian and Slavic religious cultures, and South Asia. The second part starts with a chapter by Samuel Verley, which focuses on the experiences and the narratives of the quest for Khidr in contemporary Turkey, mainly in Sunni and Alevi contexts. Manoël Pénicaud’s contribution provides a kind of overview of the figure of al-Khidr in the eastern part of the Mediterranean. The author insists from the outset on the ambiguous and versatile nature of the character. Such versatility is further reinforced by the contribution of Sara Kuehn who studies the significance of the Khidr/Ilyas encounter in interreligious studies in the Balkans. The following contribution is a powerful testimony to the difficulty of assigning Khidr to a unique position.

Subsequently, George Tsourous suggests that the reader return to the Arab world, when he in turn highlights the interreligious character of the Khidr cult, this time in Palestine. But beyond religious considerations, marked as we have seen by a real sharing of sites, the cult of Khidr is instrumentalised by social groups. On this subject, Norig Neveu shows how a site devoted to Khidr was a stake arbitrated by the State in the arm wrestling between two tribes in Jordan, one Christian and the other Muslim. Anna Krasnowolska’s contribution focuses on a fundamental link between the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent: Iran. It was through Iran that the figure of Khidr travelled from the Middle East to India. This chapter bears witness to Khidr’s popularity in Iran, but it is also enriched by references between the Iranian and Slavic worlds.

Finally, the last two contributions of the volume return to the cult of Khizr in the Indian subcontinent. Zahida Jatt’s contribution focuses on Khizr’s cult in South Asia, especially in Sindh, now in Pakistan. She questions the meaning of the rituals devoted to this figure, which the local populations assimilate to the Indus River. The last contribution focuses on Indian Punjab. Yogesh Snehi further reinforces the singularity of Khizr through the fact that the figure is still venerated in the holy city of the Sikhs in Amritsar, India. As many other religious formations, the Sikhs went through a process of “rigidification” whose aim was to clearly delineate Sikhism as a separate and distinct religion. Notwithstanding, and although he is not part of the core Sikh religion, the figure of Khird/Khizr has resisted attempts to eradicate him for the popular devotional practices.

The genesis of this volume lies in a workshop organised by Michel Boivin and Manoël Pénicaud on 6 July 2017 at INALCO (National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations) in Paris. It was part of the 2nd Congress of the scientific interest group the Middle East and Muslim Worlds (GIS MOMM), affiliated with the French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS). However, the organisers

asked some researchers who had not participated in the workshop to contribute to this volume, with a view to providing a more comprehensive overview of the Khidr/Khizr figure. That said, as the subtitle indicates, this volume remains a preliminary study, in which it aims to question the validity of focusing on one figure in order to renew studies on interreligious encounters, through the adoption of a comparative approach between two cultural areas.

Notes

- 1 The first challenge we had to face was the issue of how to transliterate the name of the figure under study. While the authors were free to use the transliteration of their choice, according to the given cultural and linguistic context, we decided for the introduction to put together the two most used, Khidr in the Middle-East and Khizr in South Asia, hence Khidr/Khizr. Although this name is the same, the difference between Khidr and Khizr is that a common letter, here *ض*, is transliterated differently depending on whether it is used in Arabic, Persian, Sindhi, Urdu, etc. The most common transliteration in Middle Eastern languages is *ḍ* or *d*, while in South Asian languages, it is *z* or *z*.
- 2 The three notices of the *Encyclopedia of Islam* were initially published in the first edition (1913–1936) and republished in the second edition (1954–2005).
- 3 Sayyid Abu’l Ala Mawdudi (1903–1979), born in colonial India, is a leading Muslim reformer who published a lot of works on political Islam. Sayyid Ibrahim Husain Shadhili Qutub (1906–1966), born in Egypt, is another main author in relation with political Islam.
- 4 See, for example, among others, HadžiMuhamedović (2018), Kreinath (2014), Navaro (2021), and Wolper (2015).

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