This talk will explore how ideas about asceticism, and in particular celibacy, change over time as the Islamic mystical tradition develops. Ibn Khafif (982 CE) was an active member of a circle of Baghdadi mystics and ascetics whom later tradition looks upon as foundational figures in the history of Sufism. Later in life, he returned to his hometown of Shiraz, where he promoted the mystical movement’s teachings among new followers. By looking at three accounts of his life, each written roughly 200 years apart, we will see how later writers construct and reconstruct the biography of Ibn Khafif in order to reconcile this figure with their own understandings of Sufism, or to make an argument about what Sufism should be. We will see how Ibn Khafif’s biographies reveal a larger trend within Sufism of prioritizing internal orientation over external action. As a case study in the development of one early Islamic discourse, this talk will also call into question the suitability of using “Sufism” as a synonym for “Islamic Mysticism,” especially during the early period.

February 17 | 6:00 PM | FedEx Global Education Center, Room 1005

Matthew Hotham is a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at UNC—Chapel Hill. He received a BA in English and Religion from Colgate University, an MFA in Creative Writing from Syracuse University, and an MTS in Islamic Studies from Harvard Divinity School.