



Edited By  
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# Sufism Today

Contemporary  
Interpretations  
Of The  
Sufi Community  
And Its Different  
Patterns

**FRIEDRICH  
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# **SUFISM TODAY:**

**Contemporary Interpretations of  
the Sufi Community and Its  
Different Patterns**

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# **SUFISM TODAY:**

## **Contemporary Interpretations of the Sufi Community and Its Different Patterns**

Editor: Dr. Mohammed Abu Rumman



## FOREWORD

By Tim O. Petschulat,  
Resident Director,  
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung  
(FES), Jordan & Iraq

“Sufism Today” is a collection of articles on different aspects of contemporary Sufism. Carefully selected and edited by Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman, they represent academic insights from many countries including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Senegal, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Originally the authors were planning to congregate in Jordan in the Summer of 2020 for a FES-conference on contemporary Sufism. While the Corona pandemic made it impossible to physically meet, the conference still took place virtually.

The online meetings allowed for rich discussions, debate and a critical exchange of ideas and opinions that are reflected in “Sufism Today”. A clear point of agreement was that Sufism has become shrouded by misinformation underscoring the need for solid and impartial research on the subject. The ultimate aim is to reach and inform audiences beyond the usual constraints of such a discussion traditionally limited to the desks of specialised researchers.

FES is a value driven organisation. We believe in social democracy. Our activities around the globe promote social justice, human rights and a thriving but sustainable economy.

Our research activity on the various Islamic traditions and their footprints on society is aimed at providing needed background information on the social, religious and cultural fabric of contemporary society for all those with an interest in positive development.

We hope that this book will contribute to a better understanding of a major spiritual and mystic manifestation of Islam. May it also serve as a beacon of light in the dark forest of misinformation on Sufism.

Speaking of enlightenment in the context of Sufism I would like to recommend the following two FES-Publications as well:

Mohammad Abu Rumman: *Mysteries of the Sufi Path*, FES Amman, 2020

Hassan Abu Hanieh: *Sufism and Sufi Orders, God's Spiritual Path; Adaptation and Renewal in the Context of Modernisation*. FES Amman, 2012.

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## ABOUT THIS BOOK

*Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman*

These pages comprise a series of specialized studies on Sufism and the social, cultural, and political manifestations of Islamic mysticism in the world today. The authors are a group of leading experts on the matter hailing from seven different countries – Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Senegal, and Bosnia and Herzegovina – and they broach a broad array of social, political, and cultural issues related to Sufism, in terms of both its intellectual and spiritual thought and its concrete realizations.

The idea for this book emerged amid resurgent talk of Sufism and mysticism, or what some scholars have called an ongoing global “Sufi awakening.” This revival can be seen in the remarkable wave of interest for the sayings and writings of Sufism’s emblematic historical figures – such as Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ibn ‘Ata’ al-Iskandari, Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, Abu al-Yazid al-Bistami, al-Hallaj, and others. It also is present in the flurry of activity and attempts at renewal among many Sufi orders and institutions that can be witnessed at various local, regional and global levels, as well as in the worldwide resurgence of spirituality.

At the same time, mystic Muslim currents have been subject to international and regional attempts at politicization. Sufi orders have thus been cast as alternatives to political Islam, even bulwarks against Islamism – a position conspicuously advocated by American think tanks. Regional policies have espoused Sufism in an attempt to counter of Salafism (to which some proponents of these policies have

ascribed responsibility for the ideological incubation of ISIS and other jihadist movements) or political Islam. These positions have accompanied the emergence of conflicting regional alliances in the Arab region.

It was such a political and intellectual climate, extending from local matters to regional and international affairs that served as a catalyst for the German Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's decision to hold a focused international conference to discuss "Sufism Today," in all its intellectual, political, social, and cultural manifestations. The preparations for the conference took place over the course of the current year and in coordination with the relevant experts, in order to demystify the subject of Sufism and offer deeper readings of its related issues in the contemporary world.

Naturally, there were other reasons and motivations behind this conference, opportunities to spread knowledge and enlightenment. Among them was the stigma that has burdened Sufism over the past decades – particularly in the era of modernity and its various schools of thought – that casts a disdainful eye toward spiritual beliefs in general, writing them off as a bunch of unscientific and unsubstantiated superstitions and fables. Likewise, other schools of Islam view Sufism and so-called "traditional Islam" more generally as conservative, inert, and unable to keep up with the questions and issues of the times.

## **1. Objectives and Concerns of the Book**

On this basis, the conveners of the conference set their eyes on certain key objectives, first and foremost how to understand or interpret Sufism in its contemporary form. Does Sufism have answers to contemporary concerns such as the relationship between religion and society, politics, and life in general? Can we discern a certain Sufi ideology on these matters, as it were, or are we faced with a set of disparate ideas, movements, and cultures?

The conference organizers also sought to gauge the extent to which there exists a Sufi awakening or revival. If such a phenomenon

is in fact observable, what form does it take? Is it merely a reacquaintance with the sayings of the great Sufi shaykhs? Or an invigoration of Sufi *zawaya*, orders, and *hadra* rituals? Or are there attempts to renew and develop Sufi concepts and suffuse them with new meanings and an awareness of the contemporary world, its problems and its transformations?

If we are not dealing with a single homogenous case, a monolithic global Sufi scene, let us then present a variety of examples of diverse Sufi manifestations across Arab and Muslim countries.

Given that Sufi schools of thought depart from other Islamic schools on the subject of women, it is important to address this topic within the conference, by considering, firstly, feminist models of Sufism, and secondly, the Sufi view of women in comparison to other Islamic schools.

The subject of politics remains one of the most important issues associated with Sufism and mysticism today, which the conference endeavored to discuss. Between political discourse in Sufi literature or the legacy of Sufism in the political sphere on the one hand, and attempts to politicize it on the other, where does Sufism really fall? And is there one or, rather, many forms (like all other schools of Islam) of Sufi orders and *zawaya*?

One axis of discussion was devoted to the Jordanian Sufi landscape and a survey of some of its related issues, such as the state of Sufi orders and *zawaya*, and whether Sufism itself is on the rise or in decline, whether it is sedimented in tradition or undergoing attempts at renewal and development.

In light of the developments related to the coronavirus pandemic, its implications for mobility and air travel, and the epidemiological situation in most countries of the world, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung decided to hold the conference virtually, by way of Zoom and social media. It also decided that, instead of holding all panels in a single day, it would distribute them over a period of more than a month, with a weekly session held to discuss each of the book's

themes. The sessions began on 13 October 2020 and continued through the following weeks, as follows:

Session 1: "Sufism and Mysticism: Contemporary Interpretations,"

Session 2: "On the Concrete Dimensions of Sufism: Diverse Societal Models,"

Session 3: "Sufism, Feminist Philosophy, and Women,"

Session 4: "The Jordanian Sufi Landscape: Tradition and Renewal,"

Session 5: "Sufism between Politics and Politicization."

This book, therefore, represents a collection of the studies and themes that were addressed during the "Sufism Today" conference, which convened an elite group of researchers and specialists from seven Arab and Muslim countries.

## **2. Sections and Themes of the Book**

The first section of the book deals with the theme of "Sufism and Mysticism: Contemporary Interpretations" and includes four studies. The first, written by Dr. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifai, is entitled "Sufism as an Inspirational Insight." It is followed by the researcher Khaled Mohammad Abduh's "What it Means to be Sufi Today." Dr. Mundhir al-Hayik pens the third study, called "Sufism as a Universal Spiritual Doctrine." Finally, Dr. Mohamad Yousri writes "A Study on the *Abdal* in Sufism: Evolution of the Concept and Its Religious, Political and Social Implications."

The first section raises a number of issues, including: a redefinition and reinterpretation of Sufism; distinguishing between comprehension and understanding; the various and varied modes of Qur'anic interpretations among the Sufi schools, from the old to the contemporary and those in between; Sufism vis-à-vis the resurgence

of spirituality in the world today; as well as a reappraisal of certain Sufi concepts and issues from a contemporary perspective.

The second section discusses the diverse forms of Sufism across a number of contemporary societies. Dr. Abdul Rahman al-Hajj of Syria presents us with the Syrian Sufi model and its clash with societal realities and political roles. His study is followed by Dr. Moun-tassir Hamada of Morocco, who touches on the Sufi landscape in his home country and the influence of the Arab Spring on local religious policy and Sufi orders. Dr. Moctar Dieye of Senegal, for his part, discusses the role of Sufi orders in the economy and production. Finally, Bosnian researcher Mariam Tulic presents a picture of Sufi heritage and contemporary Sufism's manifestations in the Bosnian landscape.

This second section focuses on the notion of a multiplicity and diversity of Sufi models. There are Sufi orders whose activities are confined to their *zawaya*, *hadra* rituals, and religious events, and other societies through which Sufism has permeated and become an integral part of the social culture. In others still, Sufism plays an important and vital role in the economy and the services sector. There is a mysticism that disdains political and cultural media and discourse, and another that is its diametrical opposite. Thus we are confronted with a kaleidoscope of Sufism, with diverse manifestations and a variety of roles across the states and societies of today's world.

In the third section, we encounter an important issue in contemporary Sufism, namely the Sufi view of women and how it relates to the modern schools of feminism. Dr. Nayla Tabbara offers us a combined perspective on feminism and Sufism and what each can offer to the other. Researcher Samar al-Fawaljeh then discusses issues related to women from the standpoint of Sufi heritage.

The fourth section deals with the Sufi landscape in Jordan, through four studies dealing with the state of Sufi orders among other novel developments. Dr. Wafa al-Sawafta begins by offering a model of renewal within the Shadhili-Yashruti order, while Dr. Mohammad Abu Rumman provides a comprehensive vision of the evolution in the Sufi scene through successive generations, from orders to

networks. Hamzeh Yassin then presents an analytical study of the patterns of transformation in religiosity among Jordanian Muslim youth, and the emergence of a tendency towards spirituality, through a range of case studies. Finally, researcher Muath Masalha presents us with multiple and varied examples of what he calls “neo-Sufis.”

The fifth and final section of the book touches on the subject of Sufism between politics and politicization through four studies. Dr. Ammar Ali Hassan opens the section by dealing with the features of Sufi discourse in the political sphere. Dr. Moh’d Khair Eiedat then treats a paragon of Sufi scholars, Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and presents for us his vision of politics. Researcher Osama Ghawji, for his part, digs into the beginnings and early stages of Sufism in order to extract an early Sufi vision of political affairs and the relationship to political authority. Lastly, researcher Hassan Abu Hanieh closes us off with a discussion of present political attempts, globally, regionally, and locally, at politicizing and instrumentalizing Sufism in the political sphere.

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FIRST CHAPTER

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# Sufism And Mysticism: Contemporary Interpretations





## **SUFISM IS AN INSPIRING VISION Its Light Was Extinguished in Corners of Isolation and Absence from the World**

*Dr. Abdul Jabbar al-Rifai*

Religion, as I understand it, is a system that produces spiritual, moral, and aesthetic meaning to fulfill human beings' eternal need for meaning in their individual and communal lives. Humans cannot dispense with meaning. It enables them to save themselves from alienation and existential angst, to gain peace of soul and tranquility of heart, to overcome the aggressive impulses that harden in its depths, and all that beckons them to intolerance and violence against others. At its origin, religion surges from the fountain of meaning, flowing like a waterfall to quench the thirst of man, whose existential sources of meaning were depleted.

Religion then spreads beyond the geographical space in which it appeared, entering societies rooted in different religions, cultures and ethnicities. It is gradually shaped by history, as its founder passes and it grows distant from its inception, and it is influenced by numerous lifestyles and diverse cultures.

Over time, multiple interpretations of the holy text take shape. They are as varied as their authors, as diverse as their cultures and former faiths. Each of them attempts to appropriate interpretative authority over the text and monopolize it. These interpretations reflect cultural differences, the interpreter's vision of the world, and the context of the doctrinal positions of the theological group to which the interpreter belongs, and the jurisprudential positions of that doctrine towards other doctrines. They also reflect conflicting networks of interests, and competition for power and wealth.

The difference goes beyond the interpretations of the sacred text, and how the spiritual, moral and aesthetic meaning it reveals is

rendered void. These differences expand the boundaries of the text, through extensive processes of transposition and borrowing of foreign concepts. In Islam, the Holy Qur'an is the holy book agreed upon among Muslims. The relatively later collection of the noble Sunna (the example set by the Prophet), meanwhile, was less straightforward. The hadith reports were recorded by multiple processes, on the basis of which earlier and later authors wrote numerous books. And these authors devised various ways of verifying the authenticity of a hadith's transmission, through the study of the *sanad* (chain of transmission), acquaintance with its narrators, the uncovering of their positions, the examination of their traces, certifying the integrity of their conduct, their fairness, their neutrality and truthfulness, as well as their moral steadfastness. Additionally, the authors of hadith collections studied the *matn* (content or text) of the hadith, examining its implications, and testing its compatibility or contradiction with the meanings of the verses of the Qur'an, and the overall aims of Islam.

If we count all the methods of narration in the collections of sound hadith, the *sunan* collections, the *musannafat*, the *mustadrakat*, the *mustakhrajat*, the *masanid* collections and the *ma'ajim*, as well as the hadith compendiums of each sect and doctrine of Islam, with their multiplicity of *sanad* chains and methods through which the hadith emerged, we find a wealth that is unmatched by the totality of religious texts of any other Abrahamic religion, and perhaps of any religion.

This wealth of hadith represents what the Companions conveyed about the Holy Prophet, PBUH, and what of this was preserved by the memory of several generations of narrators in the first, second, and third centuries AH, and subsequently passed on, in various manners of narration, to a chain of narrators. Over time, these narrations cumulated additions that echoed the all the various needs, events, aspirations, problems, conflicts and painful wars that shaped the lives of these narrators. In this way, the hadith became a mirror of all that they experienced in their lives.

This wealth gradually transformed into a source that provides theologians with the evidence and defenses that they require to form their doctrinal positions, in order to justify that these positions are rooted in and emanate from the divine revelation. These positions sketch an image of God and His attributes and names, in accordance with the independent reasonings (*ijtihad*) and opinions that the theologians derive from their own vision of God, as well as from their different inclinations, circumstances, cultures, and times.

The growth and diversity of the processes of transposition, given the diversity of their religious, political and cultural motives, and their reflection of opposing networks of interests, have created many problems. Most notably, these processes have expanded the quantitative and qualitative boundaries of the Holy Text and, by extension, those of jurisprudence, ultimately making their way in all areas of life.

Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is a legal system whose purpose is to regulate worship and all matters of private and public life. Its primary purpose does not include the production of spiritual, ethical and aesthetic meaning intended by religion. The wealth of hadiths served jurists as a wellspring for various rulings, adjudicated through the process of deductive reasoning (*istinbat*), addressing the many questions arising from individual, social, and political life.

The process of *istinbat* required rules to govern understanding of Qur'anic verses and of the Sunna and to orient their exegesis. In particular, rules were needed to cover instances in which a verse or a narration was found lacking in application, or in which the jurist (*faqih*) had a lack of conviction about the transmission of a narration of the Holy Prophet, PBUH. Thus emerged the principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*'ilm usul al-fiqh*), constituting a regulatory method in the process of jurisprudential thought. Crucially, this method elevated the status of the sunna, to the extent of the sunna adjudicating the meaning of Qur'anic verses and taking precedence over them, defining the specific application of that what is general, restricting what is

absolute, and narrowing the vast space of permissibility that exists in the Holy Book.

The scope of Islamic jurisprudence has expanded to cover everything relating to people's circumstances and livelihoods, placing the jurist in the position of answering people's various questions and seeking jurisprudential solutions to their problems. The caliphs had great need for jurisprudence, to bestow legitimacy on their authority and to justify their conduct in governance, politics, and social affairs. Since the early days of Islamic jurisprudence, the jurist was never been distant from the caliphs in Medina, Damascus, and Baghdad, although he lived outside these cities. He was subject to the strict control of the caliphs, who were always eager to integrate jurisprudence into the institutions of power by every means possible. Should the jurist refuse, they would silence him by coercion; if he resisted, he would be sent to prison. Such was the fate of the jurist Abu Hanifa (80-150 AH), who was imprisoned until his death in Baghdad by Abu Ja'afar al-Mansur for his support of Muhammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya's revolution, as well as his non-compliance with al-Mansur's wishes to take over the judiciary. Prior to that, Abu Hanifa had supported the Revolution of Zayd ibn 'Ali, leading him to be imprisoned by the Governor of Kufa, Yazid ibn 'Umar ibn Hubayra, for whom he had refused to work.

The ties of *fiqh* to power were firmly established and their mutual influence extended across different eras, as reflected in the wide-ranging prohibitions and constricted space of permissibility in jurisprudence. Authority found in jurisprudence a legitimizing pretext to control private and public life, through the mechanism of prohibition, which worked to constrain freedoms. The space of meaning in religion narrowed, and most of the verses in the Holy Qur'an that speak plainly of rights and freedoms were disregarded, along with similar verses containing spiritual, moral, and aesthetic meaning, while many hadiths that touch on these matters have, too, been forgotten.

In Islam, everything in individual and community life has come to be governed by jurisprudence. The insidious encroachment of jurisprudence beyond its rightful borders has resulted in the atrophy of

reason, subjecting everything in the life of a Muslim to a position determined by *fiqh*. Everything in the life of the individual and society has been overtaken by jurisprudence. Over time, the scope of prohibition has bulged and that of human freedom has narrowed. Reason has been enervated by the limits imposed on its expression and the space of meaning in religion has accordingly narrowed on account of its scarcity in jurisprudence.

The emergence of Sufism was nothing if not an illuminating insight to recover a meaningful religion that has been overwritten by theology and jurisprudence. It represents a courageous endeavor to return to the religion of Qur'anic values and to save religion from being reduced to jurisprudence in practice. It allows religion to resume its functioning as a system that produces existential meaning, instead of a system that produces state and political laws, that enacts constitutions and civil laws. It is reason that guarantees the laws of the state, of political administration, and other laws. Such laws are matched by development of the sciences and human knowledge, and transformations and innovations in human life, just as human experience works to erase and rectify their errors.

### **Religious Experience is the Essence of Religion**

Religious experience means coming face to face with God and His self-disclosure (*inkishaf*), delighting in appearing before Him, and sensing His presence spiritually. It is a form of existential manifestation of God in mankind. According to the Hindu mystic Radhakrishnan, the strongest proof of God's existence is the possibility of experiencing Him and recognizing His presence. God is an experiential given, a tangible content of experience, and a spiritual state.<sup>1</sup>

Religious experiences are varied, and find expression in experiences of attraction and awe, of dependency, hope, and love, to name a few. Faith is based in these experiences, and the deepest, strongest, and richest of these experiences are those of the prophets, the

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taliaferro, *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998), p. 246.

Friends and Knowers of God, and the saints, who had transcendental experiences, through which they made their way to The Truth. Religious experiences are the deepest level of religion, the core essence of every religion.

The philosophy of religion as well as depth psychology are concerned with interpreting and classifying these experiences. They reveal what is true and what is fabricated among these experiences, and how to distinguish them from deception, hallucination, or psychological disorders, distortions, complexes, mental wounds, illnesses, and nervous breakdowns.

In the legacy of *ma'rifa*-based Sufism – that is, Sufism based on intuitive, mystic knowledge – we come across explanations and interpretations that shed light on the truth of religious experiences, their nature, their limitations, their patterns, the means to achieve them, and their effects on the structure of one's spiritual life. In this legacy, we also find proof that these experiences arise organically from the need to quench the ontological thirst for the sacred.

By “ontological thirst for the sacred”<sup>2</sup> I mean human beings' need for that which enriches their existence, sanctifies their being, and gives fuel to their lives. Human beings require energy to fuel their intrinsic motivation. Their existential need is met when their lives are enriched by this energy that reveals the secret of their existence, reveals the mysteries of death and destiny, to an extent that enables them to overcome their existential anxiety.

Ontological thirst for the sacred infuses the life of every human being. Humans thirst for fullness of existence, so as to overcome their fragility, make their life bearable in a world steeped in pain, and arm themselves with an existential energy that enables them to experience as little bitterness and tragedy as possible. Thus they abandon anxiety for serenity, meaninglessness for meaning, and darkness for light.

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<sup>2</sup> For further detail on what is intended by “ontological thirst for the sacred,” see the author's monograph in Arabic entitled *al-Din wa-l-Zama' al-Untulujyy*, Dar al-Tanwir, Beirut, 2016.

Religious experiences are of all degrees and types, and vary due to the differences in human beings and the divine presence among them. They feed each person in accordance to their acceptance of their circumstances, and their ability to appear in the presence of God.

A religious experience in one's spiritual life represents the ontological dimension of religion, its essence, its spirit, and its inner meaning. A religious experience is an intimate, immersive experience into the existence of the divine essence – indeed becoming one with it – which cannot be attained by sensory tools and means. It is not necessarily proven by outward expressions of religiosity, which may sometimes in fact betray the opposite of a religious experience. This is the case of some clerics, whose overt practice of worship, prayer, and rituals in temples might deceptively indicate a profound religious experience, all while their inner world is dark and utterly disconnected with God.

Each person derives their understanding from their self, their existence, their expectations, and their prejudices. This understanding is always colored by one's environment and personal experience. Therefore, faith can only be understood in the realm of faith, and religious experience can only be understood in the realm of religious experience. Unless we achieve this experience for ourselves we cannot offer a cogent understanding of it. Just as only those who have enjoyed love can understand the nature of love. Only those who shine to rejoice in the light understand joy, and only those who are torn by anxiety can truly understand anxiety.

Words fail to truly express what they signify, so how does one tell of the passions of the soul? Lovers draw their passions from Truth, and His lights set their hearts ablaze, their souls are filled with His presence. In His presence they disappear, in His absence they reappear. Their disappearance from His view becomes a vision, and their vision of His absence is disappearance. Every other loved one is He, but He is not all that the eye sees. Through His lights the heart perceives Him, even though He may appear in the presence of another. The thirst of lovers is quenched, and so they may let their light



flow onto others. God inscribes the secrets onto their hearts, the elements of their existence turn into His attributes, to be in them. Others lack all of this, they are immersed in illusion, and they flock to all manner of falsity seeking to quench their ontological thirst, which none other than He can do.

Whoever experiences enlightened spiritual states and their joyful radiance finds that the relevant terms and phrases fall short of expressing the reality of these states. A word itself does not reveal its content, so how could it reveal states of the soul and its transcendence. Some who undergo religious experiences sometimes reach inner states of joyful radiance in which they are able to sense, whenever their conviction reaches the level of full certainty, that what is occurring to them is the quenching of their thirst at the inexhaustible spring of Light. It was as if they had been washed by the light, saw through the light, loved the light, and even became light. That is the journey from being to Truth. These are the stages they experience as they grow, become, and are molded. The arc of the universe smiles back at them whenever they contemplate it. They feel the presence of God when they rejoice in their illumination. Their insight always points them to the brightness in people, and all manifestations of the beauty of existence. They see darkness, but they avert their gaze from it. They try to see the world in a beautiful light, so that their love for it is steadfast and weathers the times of crisis, conflict, war, strife, and epidemic. That light is a source of calm, tranquility, and peace that they experience in themselves and with the world.

### **Sufism as Enslavement and Sufism as Freedom**

Not every mystic has a religious experience, nor is every person who has a religious experience a mystic. A Sufi might be spiritually empty, morally fragile, hungry for money, prestige, and power, drowning in all that is false and superficial, and might possess no spiritual wealth or lack true presence in the Lord. There is a wide array of people for whom religion is but a trade, resembling tricksters more than they do those blessed with spiritual experiences. They

pursue their trade in order to gain power over others, social status, and advantages, which is especially possible in societies that bestow such people with religious titles, sacred attributes, and grant them opportunities for material gain or to live an expense-free life. This is a form of mysticism in which the sources of existential meaning run dry, and the human within the human withers away. It is the opposite of a mysticism that bursts open the springs of existential meaning and awakens the humanity within humans. In light of this, two types of Sufism should be distinguished:

### 1. Sufism as Enslavement

By Sufism as Enslavement we mean the mysticism that is founded on isolation and renouncing a worldly life, in which the follower often loses sense of self as they succumb to voluntary servitude under the shaykhs of their Sufi orders. Such bondage results in apathy, and possibly the withering of the human within the human.

This type of Sufism grows in the halls and *zawaya* of Sufi orders, and is reflected in the life of the lonely dervishes in *khanqahat*, *zawaya*, and *takaya*. In this mysticism of solitude, a mystic often loses oneself, as Sufism turns into a form of vulgar monasticism.

This pattern of Sufism is a mirror unto all manner of distortions in Muslims' age of decline. In such a time, the backwardness and ignorance of Muslims is manifest, the diseased symptoms of previous eras of Muslim decline are widespread, and the traditions and methods of servitude are rampant. These include an education rooted in slave mentality and indoctrination, the blind submission and obedience to the shaykhs of Sufi orders, zealous devotion to eminent and celebrity shaykhs that reaches the level of worship, and blind imitation of them in all aspects, to the extent of disappearing into them. Isolation and absence from the world, escape from life, maltreatment of the body, and sacrifice of natural bodily instincts and needs – all of these, too, are signs of a Sufism of servitude.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The four tenets of the *Akbariyya* branch of Sufism are: retreat, silence, starvation, and sleep deprivation. These pillars lead humans to self-introspection, =

As initiates of a Sufi order (*muridun*) treat its shaykh as an idol, so the flame of their souls is extinguished, and they become slaves who possess nothing of their self. Their shaykhs sometime violate their dignity and confiscate their freedoms, but only after clever domestication, such that their followers voluntarily give up their freedoms and everything in their lives. Here, the function of Sufism is turned on its head: instead of self-possession through communion with God and renunciation of all else, it turns into a humiliating annihilation of dignity at the feet of the Sufi shaykhs.

We see this in many of the Mevlevi dervishes among the followers of Jalal al-Din Rumi, whose minds are intoxicated to the point of sedation, in a false sense of identification with the example set by Rumi. The profound problem with dervish mysticism is that it excels in fashioning human idols. In the psyche of many of his followers, Jalal al-din Rumi has transformed into an idol, and here Sufism's educational function is reversed, as it produces slaves for human idols. God calls us to monotheism, to adopt none beside Him as god and to never worship another: {Those whom you invoke besides God are servants like yourselves. Call upon them, let them answer you, if you be truthful.}<sup>4</sup>

Rumi became the object of their worship, and they even extended their submission to his Mevlevi chain of descendants, some for whom the connection to Jalal al-Din ran no deeper than their bloodline. From there, the spiritual and moral disease spread throughout the lives of the *muridun*. I think it is impossible to cure most of them from it, because one of the more difficult things is to free captives from their sense of need for captivity, the passion with

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= to withdraw from life and isolate, willingly or not. Ibn 'Arabi offers detailed explanations of each of these tenets. For example, he stipulates that the solitude of the *salik* is different from that of Christian and Brahmanic monastic orders, but it is difficult to conceive how a Sufi should isolate from people, and dedicate to silence, hunger and sleeplessness, without appearing to be a monk. One wonders how this presumed distinction is anything but superficial, the same phenomenon merely under a different name. See: Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Futuhāt al-Makkiyya*, pt 2: pp. 238-248.

4 The Holy Qur'an, Surat al-A'raf (7): 194.

which they venerate their shackles, their fear of freedom, and their inability to embrace a life of personal responsibility.

We do not wish our societies to be taken over by the anarchist dervishes who wander the markets and streets among ordinary people, in their strange dress fashioned from worn tatters or brocaded pieces of discordant colors. There is no value in people replicating the conduct and outward appearance of Rumi, dressing as he did, walking as he walked, and dancing as he danced, if what is said of these things were even true. Shams al-Din al-Aflaki writes that “*Mawlawna* (i.e. Rumi) started reciting the *Masnawi* on all occasions: during *sama*’, while bathing, sitting, standing, sometimes reciting it from dusk until dawn, continuously. Hussam al-Din al-Shalabi would record what he recited. Then he would reread everything he wrote to Rumi in a loud and beautiful voice<sup>5</sup> [...] He would dance in the streets, taking off everything he wore— according to the storytellers – until he would be dancing naked.”<sup>6</sup> Though we do doubt that the situation in Rumi’s case reached full nudity as alleged in al-Falaki’s telling.

### The Mythological Rumi and the Historical Rumi

Jalal al-Din Rumi, like any exceptional religious figure, transcends his time through his glowing spirit and lofty morals. Such figures hijack the spotlight, amaze communities, and draw people in, who feel an “indebtedness of meaning” toward them. The admirers and followers of such spiritual figures are not satisfied to be simply guided by their extraordinary faculties, or fueled by their religious

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<sup>5</sup> Shams al-Din Ahmad al-Aflaki, *Manaqib al-‘Arifin*, ed. Tahsin Yaziji, Tehran: Donyaye Ketab, pt. 2: p. 742. Shams al-Din Ahmad al-Aflaki was a disciple of Jalal al-Din al-Shalabi, grandson of Jalal al-Din Rumi. His book, *Manaqib al-‘Arifin* is considered to be the oldest extant source on Rumi. Ibrahim Dasuqi Shata refers in pt.1: p. 25 of his translation of Rumi’s *Masnawi* to the first story of Rumi’s dancing in Damascus’ Sagha gold market. On p. 360, he asserts that he even issued fatwas while dancing. Al-Aflaki’s book should be considered in the context of the prevailing thought and nature of religious life and culture of his time. That is to say, it contains unusual pieces of information that require further scrutiny, parsing, and examination before they can be accepted as true.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, pt.1: p. 489.

experience and spiritual gifts. Nor do they stop at their human qualities, but rather they usually exaggerate them, extrapolating a fantastical image that elevates these figures to a high position and divorces them their human nature. It is a pattern repeated by the followers of every exceptional character throughout history. This fantastical image weaves romance into their dreams, it is nourished by their idealistic desires, reinforced by the surreal horizons of their expectations, and amplified by their deep-rooted tendency to seek self-perfection. So they ascribe this perfection, of which they inevitably fall short, to this exceptional figure, to the object of their adoration.

We see these followers constantly exaggerate in their ascription of highness, singularity, and perfection to their spiritual model, this personification of their inspiration. This fantastical image of their spiritual ideal expands and swells without limit, as the virtues and exploits that these followers bestow upon them accumulate generation after generation. Various forms of extraordinary qualities, dignities, and perfections are patched together until this figure is transformed into an unrealistic, "mythological" figure that transcends time and space, bearing no resemblance to the flesh-and-blood experience and conduct of their human selves. This image is exalted far above the circumstances of their earthly life, and in no way resembles the lives of ordinary people. But when their followers lose sight of their human nature, so too do they lose the inspiring trail of their spirit and their dedication to moral conscience.

This is a phenomenon that is widespread among followers of all religions, ideologies and cultures, and does not define any one more than the others. But it reaches its greatest extent in the infatuation of followers of religions and their awe over their idols. Indeed, their love is such that they sometimes do not accept that these people lived traditional lives under the very human constraints of society, time, and space. Their followers fashion a sacred history to which they alone belong, a history outside of History, beyond earthly time.

This is what happened to the character of Jalal al-Din Rumi, because what inhabits the imagination of the Mevlevi Sufis and *muridun* today is but the "mythological" Rumi, an ahistorical Rumi other than

the one who lived out a spiritual life and had his own religious experience in the 7th century AH in Konya. There is a Rumi other than the Rumi who traversed various stages in his life to culminate, it is said, in his encounter of Shams al-Din Tabrizi.<sup>7</sup> Tabrizi filled Rumi's cup, marking a turning point that effected a transformation in the chemistry of his soul, which was set ablaze by divine love.

### **Rumi paints a Most Beautiful Picture of God**

What we need is to avail ourselves of Jalal al-Din Rumi's beautiful vision of God, his manner of interpreting the Holy Qur'an, and his understanding of the Blessed Prophet's example and Sunna. This is the historical Rumi, not that "mythological" Rumi cast outside of history by the imagination of his followers.

We are in urgent need of Rumi's illuminated vision of God, of humanity and the world, of its spiritual, moral and aesthetic luminescence, its reflections, concepts and existential humanistic values. We need its influence in tearing down the blinds, the accumulation of dark veils, that shroud the religious texts, wasting the exalted values that religion contains, and all manners of intolerances, injustices, and violations that they have allowed to be perpetrated against human dignity in the name of God.

Rumi's existential human concepts help us to see how the beautiful image of God has been obliterated, how it has been distorted, opening the way to the wars and massacres of our world, which have decimated God's caliphate under pretexts of His defense.

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<sup>7</sup> The existence and role of Shams al-Din Tabrizi (582 - 645 AH), and the spiritual chemistry attributed to him, are shrouded in mystery. It is not possible to decisively determine the details of his homeland, his upbringing, his mentors and elders, nor the nature or place of his death and the place of his burial. This leads us to cast doubt on his existence, and to raise the likelihood that he was simply a figure woven by the poetic imagination of Jalal al-Din Rumi, who was then established in history by the imagination of his Mevlevi followers, who are too busy dancing until intoxication for any serious thinking and questioning.

Rumi should inspire our hearts to overflow with divine love, and we should recall his shimmering depictions of love, beauty, compassion, peace, and all manner of magnificent humanistic meaning. We must awaken our faith to the dynamism of his own, its alertness, vigor, and luminosity, so that our spirit may rise to the level of his vast, cosmic vision. Rumi has left behind a rich method for us, which opens onto a variety of fields of religious knowledge of which we are in desperately need in an era dominated by close-minded understandings of the texts, which have crystalized into a clamoring theology of aggression and intolerance.

The legacy of Jalal al-Din Rumi inspires concepts, values, and visions that exhort us to respect human dignity, solidifying religion's humanist inclinations, and filling our lives with meaning. It offers a most beautiful image of our world, and opens onto us a spacious horizon in which to connect with the followers of various religions, creeds, and sects, so that our societies not tighten and erupt along the fault lines of their historical ideological and ethnic components.

Rumi sows the seeds of what might be called a theology of compassion, a theology of peace, of humanism, of mercy, love, and affection; a theology of beauty, joy, life, and hope; a theology of difference, diversity, and pluralism. At the same time, he cautions us against the theology of hatred, of insult, of war; the theology of death, of grief, of tears, of despair, of pessimism; the theology of the "saved sect" (*al-firqa al-najiyya*).<sup>8</sup>

I discovered in Rumi's meaning of religion what I was seeking in the way of a source of spiritual inspiration, of which I found only the faintest features in my collections of theology and jurisprudence, to the point that I thought that religion must be stunted in that matter.

In Rumi's conception, I found a religion that is not contemptuous of life, that is not fearful of art, that does not disdain joy. Jalal

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<sup>8</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i, *Inqadh al-Nuz'a al-Insaniyya fi al-Din*, Markaz Dirasat al-Din (Baghdad), Dat al-Tanwir (Beirut), 2013, p.35

al-Din's religion is the religion of solidarity in the face of a call to death in all its forms, a religion that does not run counter to human nature, a religion that calls for rejoicing, a religion that celebrates pleasures, a religion that is made of love, a religion that cares to cleanse the heart of hatred and be a key to human virtue, a religion whose compass points resolutely in the direction of Rumi's instructions: "Cleanse yourself with love before water; praying with a hateful heart is not permissible."

The eminence of the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic heritage of Rumi and his fellow Knowers of God (*'urafa'*) will overcome the violent, barren Salafist understanding of religion with its sordid infatuation for death, and will leave no breathing room for the other, grief-ridden conception. As Jalal al-Din cautioned his would-be mourners: "My brother, when you come to visit my grave, it will appear to you as though it is dancing. Do not come to my grave without a drum, since those who are overcome by sorrow are not suited for a seat at the table of God."

Some readers may think that Jalal al-Din Rumi and other Knowers possessed a dreamlike, romanticized view of human beings, and knew nothing of their true nature, that they considered every human being to be in a state of angelic purity. But whoever carefully reads their writings will find that they were experts in the states of the spirit and their manifestations, and experts in the states of the soul and its agitations. Their texts reveal deep analysis of the nature of the human soul, and a perceptive window unto the pains and sorrows which it conceals. Jalal al-Din and his predecessors recognized erring as part of human nature and that, as long as humans live on earth, they will bear the weight of sin and be unable to rise above it. Yet they had boundless trust in God's mercy, which they believed to extend to those sinners, whom God would forgive from the moment they chose to confide in Him. Hence Rumi exhorts every human being to confide in God, whatever one's sins may be, because, in his view, "It has never been a condition of approaching God that one be in an angelic state of purity. Make your way to Him bearing the full weight of your clay, He will delight in your coming even if it is but a crawl."



## 2. Sufism as Freedom

I mean here *ma'rifa*-based Sufism or philosophical Sufism, a mental mysticism that departed from closed, literalist patterns of reading religious texts. This current of Sufism produced a textual interpretation outside the framework of theological doctrine and principles of jurisprudence that departed from the inherited methods and tools of interpretation formulated by the founders of the theological factions and the originator of *usul al-fiqh*. These old methods were woven into the fabric of the rulings and positions of the various sects and doctrines, taking root over time until they rose to the rank of sacrosanct, and began occupying the status of the very sacred texts that they were intended to interpret.

*Ma'rifa*-based Sufism has offered Muslims a broad horizon of interpretation, producing interpretations that consistently generate new reasonings to keep pace with life's innovations, and flourished into a field that inspires the spiritual, moral, and aesthetic life of Muslims. This pattern of Sufism has also been able to deliver Muslims from their idolization of literal meaning that voids the actual objectives of the religion. It frees them from a commitment to form that neglects content, from an approach that ignores circumstances and delves into epithets. *Ma'rifa*-based Sufism also reconsidered the obscurity of the self, the effaced inner world human being, and opened the way for the heart's eternal journey towards Truth. It preoccupied itself with quenching the spiritual thirst for the sacred. The mysticism of mystical knowledge awakens the human within the human.

The vision of connection with God in *ma'rifa*-based Sufism is horizontal, it is the communion of two lovers. Among theologians, the connection to God is vertical, it is one of bondage and servitude. The vertical perception of the theologians finds its social expression in a complex web of positions on obedience and submission, and the weaving of authority into the fabric of society, consecrating relationships based in contrition and humiliation. Once the perception of the relationship between God and mankind takes a vertical pattern, humans assume a humiliating, submissive and servile role, while the

divine appears to be a vengeful tyrant, who doles out nothing but punishment, oppression, humiliation, and abuse.

The horizontal conception of the connection to God painted by *ma'rifa*-based Sufism finds its expression in the emphasis placed on God's honoring of humans in appointing them His sole deputies on Earth. In this type of relationship, God emerges clearly as the Most Gracious and Most Merciful, and manifests Himself as the One Who {has ordained mercy upon Himself},<sup>9</sup> the One Who qualified His mercy as boundless in saying, {My mercy encompasses all things},<sup>10</sup> and Who said of the purpose of the Prophet Muhammad's message, PBUH, {We have sent you but out of mercy to the peoples}.<sup>11</sup> His is a mercy for all, not simply for one category, group, class, sect, faction, doctrine, or chosen people.

*Ma'rifa*-based mysticism enshrines the freedom of thought and expression, although it may sometimes hide behind the nonverbal allusion, lest candid speech drop it squarely into the trap of religious and political authorities and sound its death knell. Cognitive mysticism awakens what is human within humans, because it eliminates all forms of servitude.

### **Connection with God in Ordinary Life**

In discussing this type of connection with God, I do not refer to some religion specific to Knowers and Sufis, or to philosophers and intellectuals. Rather, this connection is experienced and enjoyed by the elderly illiterate, as it is by the illiterate shepherd whom the Prophet Moses condemned for his spontaneous call to his Lord. Moses saw the shepherd speak to God in his naïve tone and crude manner of speech, as if He were a very close friend who herded flocks alongside him. For Moses, the shepherd addressed God in an impolite register not worthy of God's stature, overstepping the bounds of propriety as he pestered God to let him serve Him and meet His needs,

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<sup>9</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Surat al-An'am (6): 12.

<sup>10</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Surat al-A'raf (7): 156.

<sup>11</sup> The Holy Qur'an, Surat al-Anbiya' (21): 107.

by “slaughtering a sheep, grilling it, and serving it to Him with rice; washing His feet, cleaning His ears, ridding Him of lice...”<sup>12</sup> From the

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<sup>12</sup> This story was told in detail by Jalal al-Din Rumi in his *Manavi*, from which we quote an excerpt below. *Masnavi*, Jalal al-Din, Rumi, Book 2, “How Moses, peace be upon him, condemned the shepherd’s intimate prayer,” trans. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Kafafi, Sidon – Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 1967, pp. 178-185.

“Moses saw a shepherd on the road, and he was saying, ‘My God, You who choose (as you wish), where are You that I may become Your servant, that I may fix Your sandals, and comb Your head! And wash Your clothes, and kill the lice! And bring You milk, O Great One! That I may kiss Your gentle hand, massage Your thin foot, and straighten Your chambers when it comes time to sleep. O, to You all my sheep as a sacrifice! And all my yearning and passion are in remembrance of you!’”

The shepherd started repeating this manner of foolish talk, and Moses saw him and called out to him, ‘Hey you, to whom are you talking?’ And the shepherd said: ‘With that person who created us. With the One by whose power this earth and those heavens appeared.’ Moses said: ‘Beware; you have fallen into backwardness. I have become a Muslim, yet you have become an unbeliever. What is this foolishness, what is this infidelity and delirium? Stuff your mouth with a piece of cotton. The stink of your faithlessness has caused the whole world to rot! Indeed, your blasphemy has shred to pieces the rich fabric of religion! To whom do you speak? To your uncle? Are the body and bodily needs among the attributes of the Majestic One? Milk is drunk by those who are likely to grow and develop. The sandal is worn by those who need feet... Speaking without manners with the likes of God causes the heart to die, and darkens the pages of your actions...’

The shepherd said: ‘Moses, you have sewn my mouth shut, and you have burned my soul with remorse.’ And so he tore up his clothes, groaned, then set off quickly into the desert, and continued on.

Then came to Moses a revelation from God (saying): ‘You have distanced one of My servants from Me! Did you come to connect or to separate? As best as you are able, take no step towards separation, the most despicable of lawful things (*halal*) to me is divorce!’

‘I have charted for every human being a path, and I have granted every man a manner of expression. To him it is praise, while to you it is a sin. To him it tastes like honey, to you it tastes like poison.

‘I am free from all purity and impurity, and from every soul that has been burdened (in worshipping me), or been fearful. I have not sent down commands for some selfish gain, but that I might bestow blessings upon my servants. The People of India have their own manner of praise, and so too do the people of Sindh people have their own style. It is not I Who is made pure by their praise, =

moment Moses reprimanded the shepherd, God rebuked Moses himself for his reprehensible attitude toward the shepherd's speech, and urged him to heed His delight in the shepherd's sincerity, his spontaneity and his innocence.

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= but they who are made pure by it, who are enriched. We look not at the tongue and speech, but we look at the inner state of the soul.

'We look at the humility of the heart, even if the tongue comes stripped of humility. The heart is the substance, the speech is but presentation. The presentation is parasitic, but the substance is the intent and purpose.

'For how long will you stick to these words, insinuations, and metaphors? I ask for the flames (of love), so let it burn and grow closer to those flames! Ignite a fire of love in your soul, and then burn every thought, every phrase!

'O Moses, the people who know proper manners are one kind of people. And those whose spirits and souls burn (with love) are another. For lovers, there is a blaze at every moment... If he should speak wrongly, don't call it him a sinner, and if the martyr is blood-stained, do not wash him. For martyrs, blood comes before water! And the fault of the lover is better than a hundred truths...

The sect of Love is distinct from all religions, and the sect and doctrine of lovers is God. If the ruby does not have a seal, there is no harm in that. And love in the midst of sorrow is not distressing...'

When Moses heard this reproach from God, he rushed after the shepherd deep into the desert... Finally, Moses made out the shepherd. And the Prophet said to the shepherd: 'Permission has come! Don't seek polite manners or formality, and say whatever your heart wants! Your blasphemy is in fact religion, and your religion is a light for the soul! And you are safe, and the world in you is safe! O you who is spared, God does as He wishes, so go and release your tongue without formal respect.'

The shepherd said: 'Moses, I have overcome that. I am now covered in the blood of my heart! I've gone beyond the farthest tree, and I've gone even a hundred thousands steps further! You have struck my horse with your whip, and so it turned around, leaped high into the sky, and went beyond the horizons! May God make our human essence the confidant of His mysterious divinity... Now my state has gone beyond the scope of speech. And this what I say to you does not tell my true state.'

You see the image that is in the mirror, that image is your own; it is not the mirror's.

And the breath that the flute player blows into the flute, does it belong to the flute? No, it belongs to the man."

It is indeed widespread view among the great mystics, confirmed in their writings, that there is a diversity and multiplicity of paths to God, which could not possibly be reduced to a single path, because: "There are as many ways to God as His creatures have breaths."<sup>13</sup>

Most religious groups and politicized preachers who speak in the name of religion, including some who claim to have been deputized by the Lord of the Worlds and those who have taken up religion simply as a means to making a living, prevent us from seeing the many unsung women who carry the lamps of divine light, in which the oil is never runs dry and the flame never extinguishes. These women are workers, peasants, and mothers, some of whom rise to the stature of saints, who dedicate themselves to bringing smiles to weeping hearts, to chasing away the obscurity of dark spirits, to awakening the light in sorrowed souls. And so do these would-be spokespeople for the divine prevent us from seeing the many men whose spiritual and moral lives, while hidden from view, remain springs overflowing with existential meaning. This meaning never fails to enrich people's lives and nourish their hope, dreams, optimism, and ambition, and is a catalyst for creativity, productivity, and charity.

The truth of love among mystics is connection with God, or those that unites with God. The beloved is the one who reminds you of God. Only by the mention of His name can illuminate the spirit and reassure the heart. As Rumi depicted so beautifully: "He is the one who settled the city of the Heart, so where can I go. He is the one who inhabited the pupils of the eye, so where can I look." Hence the heart is God's home, so there can be no alienation. Where the soul is filled with meaning, there is no sadness or pain. Where the heart is quenched with divine love, there is no fear, no anxiety, no dread,

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<sup>13</sup> This phrase, although not found in hadith collections, is popular among many Sufis. See: Haydar al-Amali, Haidar, *al-Muqaddamat min Kitab Nass al-Nusus*, Tehran: Department of Iranian Studies, Institut Français de Recherche en Iran, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1994, p. 23; Haydar al-Amali, *Jami' al-Asrar wa-Manba' al-Anwar*, Tehran: Center for Scientific and Cultural Publications, Ministry of Culture and Higher Education, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1988, p. 8.

there is nothing but love, security, tranquility, reassurance and peace. {Those who believe and whose hearts are at peace in remembrance of God; Verily, in remembering God the hearts find rest.}<sup>14</sup> And as St. Augustine said, “You created us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”<sup>15</sup>

When the heart is illuminated by the light of God the Most High, it sees the world inscribed in glowing letters. Rumi made a most beautiful declaration of this truth when he said, “The outer light (comes) from the sun, while the inner light is the reflection of the lights from on high. The light that is in the eye is nothing but the light of the heart; yes, the lights of the eyes emanate from the lights of the hearts. And the light that is in the heart is the light of God. It is a light that is pure of reason and sense, separate from them.”<sup>16</sup> Only God’s love illuminates what is invisible. Only by way of the heart can one delight in the fragrance of connection with God.

We must recall that *ma’rifa*-based Sufism, of which we have indicated some of the living features and elements, is the result of human reasoning (*ijtihad*), and all *ijtihad* does not necessarily close the door to subsequent reasoning in its field. There is growing need today to reconsider the heritage of this form of mysticism and to dive deep into its many layers, sift and examine them, because it is a legacy that belongs to a certain era and has not been completely freed from its circumstances, its coercions, its contests, and its problems. One may sometimes find in the legacies of great mystics, such as Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, and others, conflicting sayings, concepts, and positions, some of which refer back to closed, strict theological and jurisprudential positions. Just as there is a vast and deep expanse of sayings, concepts, and positions rooted in a compassionate, free, and open Sufism.

In order to identify an appropriate foundational premise on which to build a doctrinal vision free from the constraints and con-

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<sup>14</sup> The Holy Qur’an, Surat al-Ra’ad (13): 28.

<sup>15</sup> The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 1.

<sup>16</sup> Jalal al-Din Rumi, *Masnawi*, trans. Muhammad ‘Abd al-Salam Kafafi, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1996, book 1, p. 180.

traditions of history, a vision that is in keeping with the great transformations in human life in the world today, one should take advantage the legacy of *ma'rifa*-based Sufism, but without getting lost in its vast orbit. One should put to practice what is living among these maxims and concepts; they remain beacons illuminating the path of *ijtihad* and encouraging the formulation of a unifying vision. Through them, Muslims might find their way out of the mazes and onto salvation, guided toward an active, influential role in the world they live in.

*Ma'rifa*-based Sufism's vision of unity remains but one reasoned interpretation of unity, and one perception of the path to connection with God. No one independent reasoning precludes a different one from emerging in a later age. Ibn 'Arabi, Rumi, and other Knowers of God are but mirrors unto the era in which they lived, and not every understanding of religion and its texts can be delivered from its historical horizons. Whoever exerts themselves to establish their own independent reasoning in this regard should not seek to imitate Ibn 'Arabi or others, nor certainly replicate their thought as it was. Instead, they must put forth a conception of unity that puts Ibn 'Arabi's vision to work in the context of the reality in which Muslims are living today. This *ijtihad* must be adapted to the singular manner of existential alienation contemporary Muslims face, and the specific questions, challenges, and novel problems that plague their spiritual and moral lives.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> 'Abd al-Jabbar al-Rifa'i, *al-Din wa-l-Ightirab al-Mitafiziqiyy*, Markaz Dirasat Falsafat al-Din, Baghdad, and Dar al-Tanwir, Beirut, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2018, pp. 229-230.

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SUFI TODAY

*Khaled Mohammad Abduh*

## Introduction

My most recent article, “al-Firar ila Ruhaniyyat al-Islam” (The Flight to Spirituality in Islam)<sup>18</sup> addressed modern forms of religiosity and shed light on the way in which young people tend to formulate new modalities for religion.<sup>19</sup> These new modalities of piety are connected to the social unrest, economic stagnation, and political tensions in Arab societies. Most commentators, or at least those sympathetic to this phenomenon within official media, have limited themselves to offering their positive appreciations, while condemning other forms of religiosity that have emerged in the wake of political tensions in Arab countries. However, they require more in-depth analyses by experts in sociology who are familiar with these forms of religiosity and can better interpret the overall landscape.

## What is Sufism?

Defining both the concept and content of Sufism has long preoccupied both scholars and *salikun* (followers of Sufism). In

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<sup>18</sup> Khaled Mohammad Abdu, *Ma'na Ann Takun Sufiyyan*, al-Mahrousa, second edition. Cairo, 2018: p. 21-32.

<sup>19</sup> People living in Arab societies are accustomed to certain classifications, and to being identified as Muslim or Christian, Shi'i or Sunni. However, we see many young people today rejecting these categories in spite of their prevalence. In their religiosity, young people are also moving beyond these limiting mindsets that have produced more narrow religious thought. Youth no longer unequivocally accept the salvation that major religious sects provide, the religiosity that they impose on the masses. Instead, youth deal with religion in a selective way, in which they develop their belief system as they choose to, until they achieve their own personal happiness. This way of approaching religion is drawn from different religious denominations and diverse individuals, including contemporary Sufism.



putting forth their own definitions about what Sufism means regarding both experience and approach, scholars and followers alike have concurred that Sufism beautifully embodies these values. However, we will try to move away a bit from defining Sufism theoretically, and instead discuss the reality we wish to examine, and how we might approach some of its challenges. At the same time, we will of course take into account Sufi heritage and history, and what has been previously written on this matter.

One scholar writing on Sufism— as an experience, path, and *madhhab* (school of jurisprudence)— argues that experience demonstrates that it is unwise to use only definitions to understand something. Definitions often fail to capture things precisely, especially when it is something spiritual or psychological. Nevertheless, people often want a concise summary, even though it is unwise to deconstruct and compartmentalize everything.<sup>20</sup>

It is not fair to say that these definitions are wrong, but they are certainly lacking. For this reason, delving into the etymology of the word Sufism in Arabic is not particularly fruitful, although much ink has been spilled on this matter. Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch (d. 1999),<sup>21</sup> after her journey with Sufi thought and way of life, wrote that the definitions offered by the leading Sufi sheikhs were merely different approaches. There were as many paths (*turuq*) as there were followers (*salikun*), for the self can only grasp what it is ready to understand.<sup>22</sup> Thus, this article also presents itself as simply one approach to the different meanings of Sufism, which its author has become acquainted with through examining some of its literature and encounters with leading Sufi figures of our time.

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<sup>20</sup> Muhammad Kamal Ja'afar, *al-Tasawwuf Tariqan wa-Tajribatan wa-Madhhaban*, Dar al-Kutub al-Jama'iyya, Cairo, 1970, p. 4-7.

<sup>21</sup> For more about Eva's journey with Sufism, see "Eva Devitray-Meyerovitch and the Presence of Rumi in Moroccan Culture," which is the introduction to *Kitab Ruba'iyat Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi*, trans. A'isha Mumad, Dar Madad, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Bariza Khiari, *al-Tasawwuf Ruhaniyya wa-Muwatana (La Soufisme: Spiritualité et Citoyenneté)*, vol. 4 in the Valeurs d'Islam series, under the supervision of Éric Geoffroy, trans. Abdelhaq Zammouri, p. 17

## Prologue: A Look at Islamophobia, and Sufism as Resistance

These days the alarm is often raised about more extremist forms of Islam, although the phenomenon of extremism represents only a small minority of Muslim societies. If we were to compare this to the relatively much greater influence of religious institutions active in Arab countries, such as Al-Azhar (in Egypt), it would become clear that Western media and some political leaders are exaggerating the role that extremism plays in Islam. The media terrorizes those living in the West and neighboring countries with the frequency of these discussions, and exploits this in many ways.

In the view of some Western pundits, Islam is synonymous with jihadist fundamentalism. Some Muslim thinkers in the West consequently feel it is incumbent on them to find intelligent ways to counter these forms of extremism—Islamic and Western alike. Éric Geoffroy, for example, has endeavored to present a different image about Islam in the West. He writes for a French audience about the renewal of Islamic thought through Sufi experiences, with an eye towards the Sufi orders (*turuq*) in Egypt and Syria. Geoffroy has also brought attention to Sufi women's lives in the Islamic world. In doing so, he offers many solutions for moving beyond extremist Islam, drawing on a modern reading of Islamic heritage as well as the writings of a wide range of Sufi reformers and thinkers.<sup>23</sup>

Geoffroy's work, and that of other "new Muslims," allows us to see Islam in a new light. In moving away from the dichotomies of secular vs. Islamic, Sufi vs. Salafi, as well as the divisions of *madhhab* (schools of jurisprudence), we are enriched by all the different forms of knowledge. Geoffroy does not necessarily either adopt or argue with the material he presents, as contemporary Islamic writings do. Such readings of Islam deserve to be examined further, as they introduce the reader to ways of confronting extremism by bringing attention to other paths in Islam, which follow in the steps of who devote themselves to knowledge and love beauty. For example, Eva de Vi-

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<sup>23</sup> See for example his book *al-Mustaqbil al-Ruhani li-l-Islam (L'Islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus)*, trans. Osama Nabil, al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Tarjama, Cairo, 2016.

tray-Meyerovitch, who received some of her religious education in the West, refined that knowledge with empirical and theoretical learning. Later, she became captivated by the world of Sufism. She recounted the details of this journey in her book *L'Islam l'autre visage*<sup>24</sup> and made it her life's work to spread the message of Islam to Europe in the way that she saw fit for that moment in time. Her work influenced the important thinker Muhammad Hamidullah.<sup>25</sup> After initially launching such a harsh critique of Sufism that he became known for his Salafi and rigid approach, he later changed his mind about the value of Sufi heritage after getting to know Eva. He explains this in a rare text that has not received a great deal of attention among Salafi currents. We will thus examine here the importance of this text, and its relevance to our discussion.

Hamidullah says:

I was raised to think rationally, and my studies and research have led me to reject anything that cannot be convincingly defined and proved. Of course, I was performing my religious duties: prayer, fasting, and the others, but for Shari'a rather than Sufi reasons. I would say to myself: The Lord is my God, and He wants me to do these things, and therefore I need to carry out the duties and obligations. I felt that right and duty were connected to each other, and that God had ordered me to do these things so that I might benefit from them, and that it was my duty simply to thank Him. After I began to live in a Western society in Paris, I was surprised and confused to find Christians who had accepted Islam, and that what led them to embrace Islam was not its scholars (*'ulama*) of jurisprudence or scholastic theology (*kalam*), but rather Sufis such as Ibn 'Arabi, or Jalal al-Din Rumi. I witnessed this firsthand. When I was asked to clarify some point of Islam, my rational evidence was not convincing to

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<sup>24</sup> There is an Arabic translation of this book by Algerian writer Wiza Flaz, published under the title: *Imra'a fi Qalb al-Sufiyya*, as part of documents published by al-Markaz al-Watani li-l-Buhuth fi 'Usur Ma Qabl al-Tarikh wa-'Ilm al-Insan, new series, No. 15, 1999.

<sup>25</sup> For more about Hamidullah, see Salah al-Din Munajjid's introduction to Ahmed ibn al-Rashid ibn Al-Zubayr, *Kitabal-Dhakha'ir wa-l-tuhaf*, edited based on Muhammad Hamidullah's unique copy. Kuwait: Da'irat al-Matbu'at wa-l-Nashr, 1959.

them, whereas the Sufi explanation immediately was. I began to gradually feel that I was losing my influence in this matter, and now I believe that what will serve Islam today especially in Europe and Africa, is neither the sword nor the intellect, but rather the heart, that is, Sufism. After developing my new vision on this matter, I began to study some Sufi writings. These writings opened my heart and made me understand that Sufism from the time of the Prophet (pbuh), and in the way in was still practiced by some leading Sufis today, was not empty words. It was concerned with finding the most direct path to God, and with personal growth and development.”<sup>26</sup> These Sufi elites were holding onto their own practices in the West, while also shedding light on the beauty of Islam, which has been overshadowed by Islamophobia.<sup>27</sup>

### The Meanings of Sufism

“I want to give a tribute to the great Sufis seekers, for they are kings in this world, and will be lords in the hereafter.” Thus wrote Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi in his book *al-Isharat al-Ilahiyya*, adding that Sufism “looms larger than its name, and its Truth is more powerful than its depiction.”<sup>28</sup> He observed how Sufism guided humanity to-

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<sup>26</sup> In his 1972 Turkish translation of the Moroccan thinker Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi's *Le Personnalisme Musulman* (1964), İsmail Hakkı Akın presented the text of a letter that Muhammad Hamidullah had sent to him, dated 27 September 1967. Shaykh Osman Nuri Topbaş guided me to this letter, during my visit to Istanbul in 2015.

<sup>27</sup> For more on these elites, see Sadiq Salam, *Faransa wa-Muslimuha: Qarn min al-Siyasa al-Islamiyya li-Faransa, 1895-2005*, trans. Zahida Darwish Jabbour, Hay' aAbuDhabili-l-Thaqafawa-l-Turath, 2012, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi's involvement in Sufism pertains to two categories. First of all, regarding the Sufi path (*maslaki*), there is great deal in the book about his relationship with Sufism, how he lived with them and adopted their ways, as well as his views regarding differences in their devotion to renouncing this world and its temptations. Secondly, on the theoretical level, he was engaged with Sufi forms of knowledge, and came to understand Sufism as “a term for many different religious forms and expressions that on the whole involve humility before the Creator and arrogance over His Creation.” Al-Tawhidi wrote that Sufism is a kind of knowledge “that moves between signs of the divine and illusory expressions.” Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *al-Isharat al-Ilahiyya*, edited by Wadad Kadi, =

wards many spiritual principles, which can be attained through one's relationship with God and His creation. There has been some opposition to this vision of Sufism, due to the link between Sufism and dervishes, which the media have sometimes portrayed as witchcraft, magic, and quackery. Alternately, opponents see Sufis as passively dependent on the divine (*ahl al-tawakkul*), and thus a source of religious backwardness, and a departure from true religion. However, when we look at Sufism today, we can move past these older legacies, which have made many modern Muslims hesitant to accept Sufism. Instead, one can come to one's own conclusions constant study and striving towards a part of the truth, without relying on others. This is what has inspired me to write this piece on the meanings of Sufism. I want to draw attention to some of its humanistic values, values that can evolve to bring together Western and Eastern strands of Sufism. Indeed, it can serve as a model for every person who wants to live in truth and spread a "culture of life" among humanity.

Sufism is the heart of Islam, and the living branch that is watered with faith. Sufism is the natural continuation of the Prophet's seclusion in the Cave of Hira',<sup>29</sup> and of the Prophet's supplication in Ta'if: "Oh God! It is you I complain to of the feebleness of my strength, my lack of recourse, and the humiliation I have been made to suffer. O Most Merciful, You are the Lord of the weak, and You are my Lord—to whom will you entrust me? To a distant foe's hostility, to one who holds power over me? As long as You harbor no anger towards me, then I am content, but I would be happier with Your blessing. I seek refuge in the light of Your face, which dispels all darkness, and illuminates the heavens and the earth. May I never incur Your wrath, or be subject to Your anger. I submit myself to You until you are pleased. There is no strength or power except through God." Sufism also manifests the meaning of the hadith "Place light in my heart, and light in my hearing, light in my sight, light to my right, light to my

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= Dar al-Thaqafa, Beirut, 1982, p. 4. See also Wadad al-Qadi, *Mujtama' al-Qarn al-Rabi' fi Mu'allifat Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi*, Dar al-Machreq, Beirut, 2019, p. 40-44.

<sup>29</sup> This meaning of Sufism concerned many of those who studied Sufism in the early days of Islam. See Abdel Rahman Badawi, *Al-Ma'na al-Sufi fi Hayat al-Nabiyy*, Majallat al-'Irfan, vol. 35, part 6, Rajab 1367/May 1948, p.804-808.

left, light before me, light behind me, light above me, light below me, make light abundant for me.”

Sufism also brings life to the faith of Ibrahim (*millat Ibrahim*). Ibrahim embodied Sufi values to an exemplary degree:<sup>30</sup> {Whoever submits fully to God, while leading a righteous life, has grasped indeed the most trustworthy hand-hold; with God rests the end of all affairs} (Qur’an 31:22). Ibrahim thus submitted himself to God, saying: I am travelling to my Lord. He travelled away to God, and made food for his guest, and became occupied with thinking about how to reach the Truth. He did not have a shaykh to ask what he saw, but he saw the planets and stars and sun. And when they had set, he said: “My beloved is exalted above the attributes of things that set.” Then he witnessed the Truth and submitted himself to it, and his voice rang out with what was in his heart {Lo! I have turned my face toward Him who created the heavens and the earth, and I am not of the idolaters} (Qur’an 6:79), and he became a Friend (*khalil*) of God.

Sufism is a turning towards to the core of Islamic learning, and the spirit of the Prophet’s message. If people have strayed from the true meaning of religion, Sufism returns them to it. Instead of blindly following instincts, or justifying themselves with rulings on what is permitted, Sufism leads people to rely on their heart and conscience in order to reach God’s purpose, rather than some transient or fleeting matter.

Sufism is magnanimous, reaching beyond the bounds of ideology or schools of jurisprudence (*madhhab*). Sufism moves past discrimination, prejudice, or petty rivalry, and recognizes that the “We are right and they are wrong” approach is harmful to the brotherhood of humanity. The great Sufi leaders, and those who have had Sufi experiences, did not do this! The Truth did not task anyone with speaking in its name or on its behalf! As Jalal al-Din Rumi wrote, “O

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<sup>30</sup> Shams al-Din al-Daylami indicated that Ibrahim was seen as an exemplary Sufi in his book *Islah al-Akhlaq*, in the manuscript of Şehit Ali Paşa 1346. See also Khaled Muhammad Abduh, *Athar Shams al-Din al-Daylami al-Makhtuta*, Majallat ‘Ulum al-Makhtut, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Markaz al-Makhtutat, 2018, issue 1, p.353-382.

heart! Why are you captive to this fleeting earthly form? Set forth beyond that enclosure, for you are a bird flying from the world of the spirit (*ruh*). You are solitude's companion, friend of He who resides behind the curtain of secrets. How, then, have you made your dwelling in this mortal world? Look to your condition, and leave it—move past the confinement of the world of form, to the meadows of the world of meanings (*ma'ani*). You are on the wings of the sacred, a friend to the council of fellowship with God, so it is not right that you should remain in this worldly place.”<sup>31</sup>

Sufism does not attempt to speak in God's name, but rather to converse with and make reference to God. God described Himself as the Most Great (*akbar*), the Most Extensive and Vast (*awsa', arhab*), and the Most Kind (*altaf*), such as transcends difference of ideology or anything else. {What thing is of most weight in testimony? Say: God is Witness between me and you.} (Qur'an 6:19).

To be a Sufi means to believe that disagreement is a blessing (*al-ikhtilaf rahma*), and that there are diverse methods of arriving at the Truth. Rumi writes that “If you put ten lanterns in a single place, each of the lanterns may be a bit different in form than the other. But you cannot distinguish between the light they produce. And if you had a harvest of one hundred apples, they all become one when you juice them.<sup>32</sup> We appear alike, but our characters are contradictory. Similarly, dust seems the same, but souls are different. In the same way, all voices may have the same tone, but one is full of pain and the other is full of playful lilts. You hear the whinnying of horses in battle, and you hear the chirping of birds outdoors: one cries out in hatred, and the other speaks of love; one screams from pain and the other warbles its joy. To those who are far from their conditions,, these voices will sound alike.

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<sup>31</sup> See *Mathnawi Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, Sha'iral-Sufiyya al-Akbar*, book 1, trans. (and with commentary by) Mohamed Abdel Salam Kafafi. Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 1966, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Mohamed Abdel Salam Kafafi, “Ittijahat Insaniyya fi Sh'iral-Sufiyya,” p. 21. Lecture given in Beirut, 1962, and later published in a 35-page volume.

Sufism does not mean passivity or estrangement from reality. The passivity of Sufism is a false notion that appeared because of misunderstandings of Sufi sayings, which were interpreted by those who opposed Sufism. This is particularly true of what has been said about *tawwakul* (trust in God) and *fana'* (self-annihilation in the divine). Leading Sufi thinkers and those who have had Sufi experiences maintain that *tawwakul* is the state of a soul that is contented and thus submits its heart to God in all matters. Outside of this state, the matters of this world have power over the heart to make one a captive of every fleeting thing, and put one in a state of constant anguish that turns one away from the God. *Tawwakul* is not at odds with striving in life. Sufi involvement in worldly matters and the learning and knowledge of their time affirms the Sufi commitment to the necessary striving. Thus, this accusation against Sufis is wrong. Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri says in his *Epistle on Sufism* that "the place for *tawwakul* is in the heart."<sup>33</sup> As Rumi writes: "You have two hands, so how can you hide your fingers? And you have two legs, so how can you make yourself a cripple?"<sup>34</sup>

After you have pitched your tent in the eye of the needle, when you cannot find your way out, you will turn your back on both worlds and pay no heed to the never-ending troubles—then you will ascend to a hundred new worlds. You will become acquainted with the hidden treasure, the treasure that will be revealed through as many thousands of faces as there are souls. When you are thus redeemed, nothing will cause grief, for the most wondrous of things is with you, and with whoever understands himself and his own need. "He knew his purpose and his Lord, and stopped asking for anything else."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari'*, part 15, *Kitab al-Riqaq*, section 50, Explanation for hadith number 6541 on *tawwakul*, p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> 'Inayatullah Iblagh explains Jalal al-Din al-Rumi's position on the matter of *tawwakul*, in his PhD dissertation at Al-Azhar University, entitled *Jalal al-Din al-Rumi bayn al-Sufiyya wa-'Ulama' al-Kalam*, with an introduction by Yahia al-Khashab, al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, 1987, p. 199-205.

<sup>35</sup> *Rasa'illbn Sab'in*, edited and with an introduction by Abdel Rahman Badawi, published by al-Dar al-Misriyya li-l-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama, 1965, p. 33.



Sufism means wishing goodness on all humankind without excluding any sect, school or group of people. As for those who would oppose what you believe, Sufis believe in unity and not in division. All people are fused in one body, so what befalls one pains all. Rumi said: "Oh my Lord! Bring down onto this earth the water of purity, until hellfire is made light." And Sa'adi Shirazi wrote his book *Gulistan* (The Rose Garden) that "all humankind comes from one body, and will so return, and thus if one limb suffers from pain and illness, then the other limbs do not sleep. If you do not feel for others, how are you human?"<sup>36</sup>

A Sufi is a traveler in the expanses of meaning! Sufis create a new kind of language. Even though they believe in eternity and creation, they do not limit themselves to the words found in the dictionary. For before the word was the letter, and this letter had a thousand thousand meanings. And though the letter expressed the outline of the meaning, there are situations, colloquies and witnessings that could never be expressed by a letter or an "it is said." It is like the painter's canvas which is as magnificent as what the artist saw in his mind's eye, and later becomes a symbol that carries many different meanings, depending on who is looking at it.<sup>37</sup>

Sufism is concerned with the soul (*nafs*), its vices and its illnesses, in order to treat them and progress along the path to perfection. Sufis thus concerns themselves with all of the precise details that might disturb the clarity of life, or hamper the path that they follow. Sufis believe that as you grow closer to the soul, you are also

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<sup>36</sup> Malika Ali al-Turki, *Qutufmin Adab Sa'adi al-Shirazi*, Majallat al-Adab al-Islamiyy, Saudi Arabia, 1415/1994. Volume 2, Issue 6, p. 57-61

<sup>37</sup> Ali Hussein's recently published book *Art in Memoirs: Setting Forth (al-Fann fi Dhikrayat: Shadd al-Rajul)* resembles a journey from Sufism to life. It contains forty poetic meditations written by Hussein in both Arabic and English. Each text includes an element of his Sufi life and meditations. Just as many of the Sufi texts of the past offered the Sufi heart different forms of *dhawq* (spiritual tasting), *ishara* (allusion), and *ramz* (symbolism), Hussein also considers his texts to be a source of *ilham* (inspiration): "Inspiration could come from the way an idea is sketched, or from the sound and harmony of the letters. At that time, the writer's role is to just to convey the meaning through these images, until the end of the reader's journey."

growing closer to God, and that knowing yourself is thus a way of knowing God. In this way, human knowledge and knowledge of God together allow for complete knowledge of the soul. If we compare what Sufism says about the self (*nafs*), with some of what psychologists say, we will come to realize that Sufis were aware of the medicine of the heart and how to remedy psychological problems. We could define Sufism as “a continuum of affective states.” In expressing their affective state, especially after the state ends (*zawal*), Sufis undertake a process of recalling the recent past. Since some have stronger abilities to analyze, describe, and recall these experiences than others, some Sufis try to express their affective states through symbolic means that stretch beyond the limitations of language.<sup>38</sup>

What Sufis experience in the state of *liqa'* (encounter with God), *hadra* (a type of collective ritual) and *ilham* (individual inspiration) cannot be described with normal language. Sufism has thus played a role in developing other ways of communicating, sometimes called the “language of love and beauty,” which cannot be fully expressed in the same way that the earth cannot contain the waters of a flood. This drowning can be described as a pleasant kind of drowning that Sufis enjoy, reaching a unique euphoric state. An artist can communicate some of these euphoric feelings through painting or music, but you cannot fully grasp this without living as a Sufi yourself.

This can perhaps help us understand the words of Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, who said: “O God! O truthful ally! O Protector! You see my scattered words, and how I have fallen short of my aim, and you see my stammering phrases and stumbling gestures, as if I was a stranger

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<sup>38</sup> Al-Taftazani, *Nazrailaal-Kashfal-Sufi*, Majallat al-Fikr al-Mu'asir, issue 34, Cairo, December 1967, p. 33-40, and *Saykulujiiyyaal-Tasawwuf*, Majallat 'Ilm al-Nafs, Oct. 1949, p. 291. The latter article is considered to be among the first Arabic-language articles written about the connections between Sufism and psychology, which was later dealt with at greater length by Mohamed Kamal Ja'afarin his book *al-Tasawwuf Tariqan wa-Tajribatan wa-Madhhaban*. This was followed by further studies on the topic, including the dissertation of Amer al-Nagar, *al-Tasawwuf al-Nafsiyy*, al-Hay'a al-'Amma li-l-Kitab, Cairo, 2002. In 2005, Abdel Rahimal-Mubarak translated the work of Jamal al-Hashimi into Arabic, under the title *Madrasat Jalal al-Din al-Rumi wa-'Ilm al-Nafs al-Hadith*, Dar al-Hadi, Beirut.

to my own condition, a foreigner unto myself. These are the words of the dying, and the resort of the negligent. It is no surprise that a servant falters in describing his Lord, for whoever has felt an ecstasy (*wajd*) like my ecstasy and uses my metaphors (*kinaya*) and allusions (*ima'*), says too few words even if he speaks at length, and sounds like a fool even he is reticent. He is absent even if he is present, is incapable even if he is able, is baffled even if he sees, and tires even though he continues walking.”<sup>39</sup>

To be a Sufi today means that you are choosing a strain of religion that is full of mercy, beauty and love in its view of the Creator and His creation. Sufis are humble before God’s creation and see all as the children of God, and keep their hearts pure so that they might ease the suffering of others. Sufis praise the hearts of all worshippers, after they perceive the difference between fresh water and stagnant, the genuine pearl and the fake, for {You are toiling towards your Lord, a hard toiling until you meet Him.} (Qur’an 84:6) What Sufis attain after this struggle, they try to share with others in its simplest form. Sufis do not turn to anyone except their Lord and God and do not promote themselves as larger than life or sell themselves as a temporary earthly authority. Sufis do not exploit others, man or woman, who leave their weary souls in their hands. They protect those who have sought refuge with them, and they do not violate this protection, nor turn it into a tool to subjugate men or toy with women.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Wadad al-Qadi, *al-Lugha wa-l-'Ajz 'ayn al-Ta'bir fi Adab Abu Hayyan*, Majallat Fusul, issue 4, Cairo, October 1995, p. 57.

<sup>40</sup> Many Sufis have explained how they used their upstanding morals to better engage with the self and creation. These ideas are thoroughly analyzed in Mohammad Kamal Ja'afar, *Fi al-Falsafa wa-l-Akhlaq*, Dar al-Kutub al-Jama'iyya, Cairo, 1968; *Dirasat Falsafiyya wa-Ikhlaqiyya*, Maktabat Dar al-'Ulum, Cairo, 1977; *Madkhal ila 'Ilm al-Akhlaq*, Maktabat Dar al-'Ulum, Cairo, 1980. Alexander Knysh also examines Abu al-Husain al-Nuri (d.295/907) as an example of how “ethics are a foundation and starting point for the Sufi path.” See “The Sufism of the Baghdad School” (43-67) in Alexander Knysh, *Islamic Mysticism: A Short History*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2000.

## Why Do We Need Sufism Now?

Can Sufism offer modern Muslims a new approach? This question has been raised repeatedly, whenever Sufis offer a new vision on some of the issues that have concerned Muslims. Sufis have sometimes been accused by the “new Enlightenment” of having a patchwork ideology. Opponents of Islamic thought, or those who judge Islam based on the violent extremism and terrorism of today, consider Sufi views to be some kind of contemplation out of touch with more tangible realities. In this view, such events demonstrate that there is no doubt that “Islam is a religion of prejudice and discrimination and rejecting the Other.” Many Arab writers today have adopted this vision of Islam. Some Christian leaders who have contributed to Muslim-Christian dialogue efforts, have even changed their minds about the path of tolerance as they witnessed increasing numbers of violent incidents. They feel that there is no longer a viable solution that can change the mindsets of fundamentalists Muslims.<sup>41</sup>

Sufis hold that there are “as many paths to God as there are souls among His creation.” This saying has become well-known, and often repeated by Muslim youth today. It has also manifested itself in Islamic history through the proliferation of many different orders (*turuq*) and schools of thought. Those who repeat these words or live them out in their lives demonstrate that all different forms of religiosity are worthy paths to ascend towards God. They are all valid paths, whether they suit me personally or not, whether they express the obvious or not. However, only a small number of people believe this, while a majority judge the beliefs of others based on their own personal understanding and their sense that they hold the one truth.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> This is very evident in all of the videos that are broadcast on social media sites by critics of Islamist discourse. Henri Boulad is one such Christian priest who changed his mind regarding Muslim-Christian dialogue. He stopped believing in dialogue after he saw the spread of violent Islamist extremism, according to one of his lectures.

<sup>42</sup> This saying (that there are “as many paths to God as souls among His create on”) demonstrates a Sufi principle that has appealed to many. Sufi texts help us in tracing the historical trajectory of belief in this way of thinking, and to see =

The story of the Blind Men and the Elephant, a Buddhist tale that later entered the Sufi tradition, embodies this principle that there are “as many paths to God as there are souls among His creation.” Sana’i Ghaznavi narrates this story in his book *Hadiqat al-Haqiqa*, in which he argues that the diversity of viewpoints towards a single question is proof of the richness of diversity, from which we can all benefit in order to counter arbitrary divisions and prejudice. Sana’i affirmed in his conclusion to the story that in spite of the fragmentary nature of truth, Islam is the foremost and decisive truth, and so someone seeking truth should still turn to Islam. Rumi learned from those who came before him, and retold the story in a different way. He chose a more open-ended conclusion that reflected the vision that he lived and believed in. Rumi says:

“The eye of perception (*hiss*) is like the palm of the hand. With only one palm you cannot comprehend everything. The foam on the sea is one thing, but the source of the sea is another entirely, so leave behind the foam and look for the source. The foam moves on the sea day and night, and you keep looking at the foam but you don’t look at the sea, which is strange. We are like boats who run into each other in the water; we are blind though the water is clear. O you who have gone to sleep in the vessel of the body, you have seen the water: now behold the water of the water.”<sup>43</sup>

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= that it is expression of religious truth from a particular moment in history. Since the first Sufis uttered this phrase— as we learn from Abu Talib al-Makki’s *Qut al-Qulub*— this expression has been repeated in different forms in other Sufi writings. As Mahmoud Shabestari wrote: “If Muslims would only realize what an idol is, they would see that religion is worshipping idols. Every idol has a spirit (*ruh*), and under all idolatry is a kind of hidden belief. Unbelievers are also always praising God: {There is nothing that does not glorify Him} (Qur’an 17:44). Who is it that adorns the idol with such beauty? And who would be worshipping idols unless he desired the Truth? See Ibrahim Hamid al-Maghazi, *Mahmoud al-Shabestari wa-Madrasatuhu fi al-Tasawwuf*, PhD Dissertation under the supervision of Is’ad Qandil, Faculty of Arts, Ain Shams University, 1982, p. 63-70.

<sup>43</sup> See al-Tawhidi, *al-Muqabasad*, edited by Hassan al-Sandubi, p. 259. Al-Sandubi introduced the story by saying: “People do not attain every aspect of the Truth, nor are they ever completely mistaken about it.” Al-Tawhidi also included Abu Sulayman’s brief summary of the story and its lessons in the following way: “This includes good and accessible anecdotes, which those who heard collected, =

Sufism offers modern Muslims as many different perspectives on the paths to God as there are followers (*salikun*). Some have buried these different visions or stopped discussing them, but they offer useful perspectives on religious experience and development. It shows us new doors and windows through which we can reach wider horizons that we were not previously aware of, due to the number of cracks and crevices that we have tried to peer through in order to view the world and our fellow man, and to commune with God. Sufism enables us to become acquainted with the word of God without a mediator, unlike how the scholastic theologians (*'ulama' al-kalam*) approach the divine and debate about it. The disputes of early *kalam* and Islamic sects have been passed down through generations and separated from their historical contexts. This has made it seem as if contemporary Muslims are caught in and repeating the past, and in so doing erase their modern-day presence.

Some of the living thought in *kalam* and the natural sciences is absent in Arab discussions due to our interest in false sectarian differences. Sufism teaches us not to focus on superficial difference and petty details that conceal the true life of souls. Those who are unaware cannot guide themselves to find the path to God and where He

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= and for which they furnished commentaries. He said: There is no reasonable person in a school of thought (*madhhab*) who says anything unless he feels there is something that obligates him to after looking in his heart, and which what is fitting for his nature, and consistent with his inclinations, and clever and generous, and which he has reached through extensive premeditation." Sana'i al-Ghaznavi, *Hadiqat al-Haqiqa wa-Shari'at al-Tariqa*, trans. Ibrahim al-Dasuqi Shita, Dar al-Amin, Cairo, 1995, p. 33-34; Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulum al-Din*, vol. 4, *Kitab al-Tawba*, in which he tells the story with the title *Bayan Wujub al-Tawba wa-Fadluha*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Arabiyya al-Kubra, p.6. This story is also told in the *Mathnawi* of Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, trans. Ibrahim al-Desuqi Shita, Cairo, p. 123-124. See also Muhammad al-Muhammadi, *Qisas al-Mathnawi*, Dar al-Mahajja al-Bayda', 1998, p. 145-146. Farid Guetata also addressed this story in his study, *al-Ramziyyawa-l-Tamthil fi-Qissa al-Umyanwa-l-Fil*, along with the proceedings of the seminar (*nadwa*) held on the occasion of the eight-hundred-year anniversary of the death of al-Rumi, published by al-Majma' al-Tunisi li-l-'Ulum, Tunis-Carthage, 2009, p.183-194.

dwells. They are preoccupied with everything else but are not occupied with reforming their own lives.<sup>44</sup>

### **Why do we need Sufism? Why Sufism now?**

Sufis have recorded a great deal about the need for *suluki* knowledge (knowledge obtained from the Sufi journey or path) among Muslims. Sufism is the jurisprudence of the heart, and the beating heart of Islam. Sufism has shaped the lives of many scholars and made some of them into luminaries in both the East and the West. We can discuss here some of the biographies of modern Sufis that bring us joy. There is a Catholic man who was guided towards Islam through the gate of Sufism, and a woman who found Islam through a poetic text written by a Sufi. Additionally, there are bestselling books in the West written by Persian and Arab Sufis, as well as Sufi poetry, which has a following among atheists and believers alike! There are many more examples like this.<sup>45</sup>

Sufism aids us in improving our spiritual readings, for as it has been said, the entire universe is imaginary and has no true reality, except for God! We should not limit ourselves to the surface meaning of words or cling to what we have inherited without thinking, but rather focus on what animates true meaning within us. Illusions are inevitable for everyone who feels and lives and evolves. How often have we imagined, whether from shock or pain, that everything happening was only in our minds! We wonder: perhaps that was what was meant, or perhaps it was something else entirely. The words “maybe” and “perhaps” are human, and we have learned from the jurists, philologists, Qur’an commentators, and writers of literature to look at words from many angles, to ascertain esoteric meanings

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Taftazani, *’Ilm al-Kalam wa-Ba’d Mushkilatihi, Maktabat al-Qahira al-Haditha*, 1966, p. 16-17.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Shaykh Osman Nuri Topbaş provides many such examples of Sufis, and urges people to embrace Sufi principles through his lectures and published works in many languages. See his book *Tasa’ulat Hawla al-Tasawwuf* in Arabic translation (Dar al-Arkam, Istanbul, 2014) and *Al-Tasawwuf Mujahida al-Muslim Nafsih*, Dar al-Arkam, Istanbul, 2016.

that might not be explicitly spelled out. Sufism teaches us to open the door to the independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) of others, and not to judge anyone by our own unevolved understandings.

Sufism tells us that at the moment of true unveiling (*inkishaf*) there is no veil between a person and their soul (*nafs*). This moment is the proof that God establishes for His worshippers. You will find yourself facing your soul without any restriction or covering, without desire or fear, and you must choose who to be. You must choose to begin from your own experience with God and with people, or choose to bury yourself in the crowd of bodies, to choose the *halal* or the *haram*, to do what is permitted or forbidden, to reveal or to withhold. You, in that moment, announce your soul's birth or plunge it into the graves of others!

Sufism does not make you concerned about what some stranger from Iraq or Egypt says, and it does not place boundaries on nations. Nations are like homes, and for Sufis, home is the heart, and the heart does not change as long as the heavens and earth do not change. Sufism allows you to realize the importance of your homeland and of Truth, and your station (*maqam*) which belongs to no one else. Each of us has their own state (*hal*) and station (*maqam*) that they attain on their own.<sup>46</sup>

Sufism does not crowd you with people, even if you are in Mecca before the Ka'aba. Sufism does not mean running to catch the prayer and the imam will take care of whatever you missed due to negligence or forgetfulness. But in Sufism you are your own imam when you are ready to awake and you are not a servant to anyone. Sufism, as Abu Husain al-Nuri and others have said, "is both freedom

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<sup>46</sup> *Al-Akhar? wa-Lakin Hal Hunaka 'Akhar'?* Interview in *Majallat al-Shabab* with Dimitri Avghérimos, Syria, issue 14, June 2006. Dimitri is an exemplary researcher and follower of Sufism and has written and translated various works about Sufism and its schools.



and liberation.”<sup>47</sup> You are your own guide, and you realize what is gathered within you, rather than gathering with others.<sup>48</sup>

Sufism considers human nature and its weaknesses, and leads people towards God, through the easiest and simplest path, and is gentle in this work. It does not harm or mock people, or compromise their particular ways of being, taking as a model the moral system the prophet sought to establish during early Islam. The Prophet gave advice in a way that allowed people to only reveal themselves before their Lord. “What is the matter with people who abstain from a thing which I do? Indeed, I am the one of them who knows the most about God and who fears Him the most.” Where is this thinking in the religious groups who do not hold back from using the foulest language to describe their brothers in faith, or those with opposing views, or judge them as unbelievers? Sufism instead follows the example of the merciful and compassionate Prophet. The Prophet said, “You cannot be believers until you are merciful.” So they said, “We are all merciful, O messenger of God!” He told them: “This mercy is not the mercy of one of you to his friend, but rather mercy is mercy to all.”<sup>49</sup>

Sufism allows you to find tranquility. It does not make you tremble when you see a beautiful woman, or make you speak salaciously about her later when telling someone else about what you saw. Sufism lets you smile if you have seen something beautiful, in nature or in a woman. Not every glance is accompanied by lust and trembling in the body; a proper Sufi witnesses beauty and then thanks God. Actually, some simple-minded Sufis go so far as to say

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<sup>47</sup> Khatoun Salma Krist, *Abu al-Hussain al-Nuri: Al-Sura wa-l-Athar*, Ph.D. Dissertation, copy deposited in AUB library, Beirut, 2010, p. 61-91.

<sup>48</sup> Sufism has a different view of prayer than do the jurists (*fuqaha*). For example, some Sufi elites considered reverence and humility (*khushu'*) to be necessary to the validity of the prayer. Al-Ghazali narrated from Abu Talib al-Makki who narrated from Bishr al-Hafi, “Those who don’t show humility aren’t able to pray (their prayer is obstructed).” See al-Alusi, *Ruh al-Ma’ani fi Tafsir Al-Qur’anal-Azim*, Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi bi-Beirut, vol. 18, p. 73. See also al-Ghazali, *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din*, Dar al-Ma’rifa, Beirut, p. 159-161.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Tafaznani, *Dawr al-Tasawwuf fi al-Taghyir al-Ijtima’i*, Majallat al-Muslim al-Mu’asir, issue 67-68, 1993, p.7.

that if you are so pure of heart that looking at a beautiful woman is like looking at the beauty of nature, then it is in fact a duty to look at her!

Sufism allows you to see music as one of God's innumerable languages. God speaks through all things, and as He said in His book, {If the ocean were ink for the words of my Lord, the ocean would run out, before the words of my Lord run out, even if we added another ocean for its aid.} (Qur'an 18:109). In any language that God speaks, you welcome His speech. Your heart will not become a living and knowing heart if it remains preoccupied with what it inherited from old debates about the hadith on playing music and whether it is *halal* or *haram*!



## SUFISM AS A UNIVERSAL, SPIRITUAL DOCTRINE

Dr. Mundhir al-Hayik

Sufism represents an elevated stage in the development of religious thought that, given the right circumstances and individuals, might have turned into a full-fledged school of philosophy. Some Sufi orders managed to set into motion an interpretative awakening of human thought to overcome man's ignorance of the secrets of the universe, the mysteries of the soul, the reality of God, and the ways to reach Him. In so doing, Sufi thought charted a new path to knowledge and understanding that transcended the limits and scale of the human mind, with its unique symbolism that Sufis came to know as "allusions" (*al-isharat*).<sup>50</sup> Sufi thought has always sought to meet the needs of the human soul in its tendency towards perfection. It takes religion, and the divine essence in particular, as its starting point, seeing humanity as one among multiple stages of divinity. The *salik* (Sufi follower) is enjoined to overcome all that stands in the way of ascending through these stages, so as to evade the inevitable annihilation of the human self. It has been said that "the Sufi path is but a series of stations which the *salik* must cross in order to achieve bliss in unity with God."<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Al-Husayn ibn Mansur Al-Hallaj says: "Whoever does not interest himself in our allusions (*'isharat'*) will find no guidance in our words." *Akhbar al-Hallaj*, 'Ali ibn Anjab al-Sa'i, 57, ed. Muhammad Fawzi Al-Jabr, Dar al-Tali'a al-Jadida, Damascus, 1996.

<sup>51</sup> *Al-Turath al-Ruhi li-l-Tasawwuf al-Islami fi Misr*, Khafaji Muhammad 'Abd al-Mun'im, 114, Mu'assasat al-Matbu'at al-Haditha, Cairo, 1990. The author here quotes Sheikh Sayyid Mandur, *muqaddam* of the Sammaniyya order in Giza, but it is a saying that is often repeated by Sufis and which some attribute to Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi.

## Sufism and Islamic Law

For most of its followers, Sufism amounts to diving deeper in one's understanding of Sharia, insofar as the Sufi does not stop at the outward, surface meaning of things, but seeks rather to become conscious of their inner truth. Sufis further contend that theirs is a thorough study of the self, an inspection of the soul, and contemplation of what goes on in the spirit, because the soul is the mirror onto which the entire universe is reflected. They have never considered their way to be a doctrine or sect, but rather an approach or path of worship that is in full compliance with Islamic law.

By contrast, Islamic jurists (*fuqaha'*) saw in Sufis' celebrations and forming of circles around the graves of saints (*awliya'*, literally "friends of God) the practice of a certain form of idolatry or, to use their exact terminology, of *shirk* (idolatry, polytheism). Sufis, in turn, mocked the narrowmindedness of this view, asserting that celebration of saints is a means to seek the blessing of those who served as guideposts along the path to God.<sup>52</sup>

Sufis also parted with Islamic jurists in their adoption of the concepts of "*zahir*" and "*batin*" (outer or apparent meaning and inner or hidden meaning). They claimed that the jurists were people of the *zahir*, satisfied with external husks that veil the realities of true religious experiences. The jurists, for their part, denounced these views as *laghw* (evil, vain talk; falsehoods), arguing that the Prophet of Islam left his followers on a "clear path" (*al-mahajja al-bayda*),<sup>53</sup> outwardly and inwardly, and there can be no such thing as what Sufis call inner or hidden knowledge. And while jurists reject any esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) of verses in the Qur'an, asserting that it is an open door to *laghw*, Sufis are extremely allegorical in their interpretations of the Qur'an. Sufis say that the meanings of the Qur'an unfold in heart of the reader, in accordance with the Sufi directive to "read

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<sup>52</sup> See *Nusus Sufiyya, Dirasa Muqarana*, Mundhir al-Hayik, Dar Safhat, Dubai, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Al-'Irbad ibn Sariyya reported, "The Messenger of God exhorted us and said "I have left you on the Clear Path, its clarity the same by day and by night. Whoever deviates from it after me will be damned." Narrated on the authority of Ibn Majah.

the Qur'an as though it were revealed for you."<sup>54</sup> But juristic criticism of Sufis is nowhere stronger than on the matter of their rejection of hadith. It is said that when Sufis would hear someone reciting a hadith, they would exclaim: "Wretched people who receive dead hadith from dead men, while we draw our knowledge from the unperishing, unchanging source that lives and does not die. To whomever says 'my father narrated to me from my grandfather,' I reply 'my heart narrated to me from my Lord.'"<sup>55</sup>

The most significant reproach that jurists, as well as ordinary Muslims and critics, have made against Sufi orders is that they prevent their followers from practicing jihad and fighting aggressors. Sufis refer to jihad as "lesser jihad," in opposition to an inner jihad that they consider to be the greater jihad. According to Umar ibn Sa'id al-Futi Tal, "the *umma* in its entirety has come to agree over the imperative of inner jihad, of departing from what is familiar and returning to God Almighty, an undoubtedly greater jihad than the struggle against the unbeliever." 'Umar Tal enumerated several reasons for this, including: "that inner jihad is an individual obligation (*fard 'ayn*) while jihad against aggressors is a communal obligation (*fard kifaya*); that one's self is the greatest enemy of all, that harm done by the enemy is short-lived and limited to this world, and for this reason the struggle against the aggressor is the lesser jihad; that everyone is capable of jihad against an aggressor, while few are capable of inner jihad; that whoever undertakes inner jihaddoes so for his own betterment and salvation, while he who undertakes jihad against an aggressor does so for the benefit of others – and therefore it is far better for one to die a martyr of inner jihad than it is for one to die a martyr of jihad against the unbeliever."<sup>56</sup>

All those who have written about Sufism, critics and supporters alike, categorize it within Sunni Islam (*ahl al-sunna wa al-jama'a*)

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<sup>54</sup> *Al-Isra ila al-Maqam al-Usra*, Muhyi al-Din Ibn 'Arabi, 49, Dar al-Mahabba, Damascus, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Famous sayingrepeated by Sufis; the author was not able to trace back the saying to Sufi shaykhs.

<sup>56</sup> *Saif al-Haqq al-Mu'tamid*, 'Umar ibn Sa'id al-Futi, ed. al-Hadi al-dali and Mutir Ghayth, 219, Tunis, 2018.

because Sufis have never espoused belief that leadership of the Muslim community is passed down through the prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*), 'isma (infallibility of the imams), and *taqiyya* (permissibility of concealing one's faith), despite their significant commonality with Shi'ite Islam in the use of *zahir* and *batin* in textual interpretation. But while it is true that Sufi Islam first emerged among Sunni Muslims and that most of its greatest figures have been Sunni Muslims, a Twelver Sufism later emerged and proliferated in Iran after its shi'ification. It was from the fold of this Shi'ite Sufism that came the preaching of the Báb, from which then sprung the proselytism of his student Bahá'u'llah.<sup>57</sup>

### Other Religions and Schools of Thought

The Qur'an and the sunna are the spring from which the first Sufi Muslims drew their teachings. But as the early Muslims began intermingling with foreigners, whether these foreigners retained their religion or embraced Islam, it was inevitable that they would be influenced by the ideas of these peoples' ancient religions and philosophies. The transfer of ideas took off with even greater speed during the prolific Arabic translation movement of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AH and the interactions of these many cultures ultimately gave birth to a theology that is the foundation of Sufi thought in all its diversity.<sup>58</sup>

### Sufism and Philosophy

With the translation of Greek philosophy into Arabic, Sufis began picking up its vocabulary as well as some of its theories. Among the beliefs they adopted, some Sufi sheikhs began speaking about *fana'* (annihilation of the self) and *baqa'* (abiding in God). In terms of practices, they began turning towards isolation and withdrawal from society, into retreats or caves. In terms of ethics and morals, they be-

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<sup>57</sup> See: *al-Silla bayn al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Tashayyu'*, Kamal Mustafa al-Shaybi, Dar al-Ma'arif, Egypt, 1989; *Kitab al-Aqdas, al-Kitab al-Baha'i al-Muqaddas – Dirasa Muqarana*, Mundhir al-Hayik, Dar Safhat, Dubai, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> See: *al-Ab'ad al-Sufiyya fi al-Islam wa-Tarikh al-Tasawwuf*, Annemarie Schimmel, trans. Muhammad al-Sayyid and Rida Qutb, Manshurat al-Jamal, Cologne, 2006.

gan praising ascetism, and wrote heavily about dreams and visions of houris, and the occurrence of miracles and other supernatural phenomena. Through philosophy, some Sufis attempted to decipher the puzzle of existence: How, why, and to what end was the world created? Who was its creator, and what is the essence of his creation?<sup>59</sup> They put forth many theories, some of which faded on account of their inconsistency with reason or religion, and others which became famous and spread, such as the theory of *wahdat al-wujud* (the Unity of Being).

The proponents of *wahdat al-wujud* fell into two camps: one camp that saw God as a spirit and the world as its body, and another that held the view that all existent things had no true existence except in the existence of God, so that all that exists is one in God. To indulge Shari'a in this idea, the latter camp pointed to the famous hadith "I saw my Lord in the form of a curly-haired, beardless young man..."<sup>60</sup> It was for this reason that Ibn Taymiyya said, "They claim verification (*tahqiq*) and superior knowledge (*'irfan*), but they make the existence of the Creator the same as the existence of created things, such that all the attributes borne by creatures – both the good and the repugnant, the praiseworthy and the blameworthy – are attributes possessed by the Creator Himself."<sup>61</sup> The Andalusian Sufi philosopher Ibn Masarra was one of a number of Sufi sheikhs who first spoke of the theory of *wahdat al-wujud*. He approached the issue in a philosophical manner, in which *wahdat al-wujud* consists in the

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<sup>59</sup> *Al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Tafalsuf*, Sabir Ta'ima, 117, Maktabat Madbuli, Cairo, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> Hadith of Qatada related by 'Akrima by way of Ibn 'Abbas, categorized as *marfu'*: "I saw my Lord in the form of a curly-haired, beardless young man wearing a green garb." Authenticated by a number of scholars, including: Imam Ahmad, in *al-Muntakhab min 'Ilal al-Khallal*: 282; Abi Ya'la, in *Ibtal al-Ta'wilat*: 1/144; Considered weak by Ibn al-Jawzi in *Al-'Ilal al-Mutanihiyya*: 36/1; Repudiated by al-Dhahabi in *Sirr A'lam al-Nubala'*: 10/113; Al-Subki said, "Slanderous, forged hadith," *Tabaqat al-Shafi'iyya al-Kubra*: 2/312.

<sup>61</sup> *Bayan Talbis al-Jamhiyya*, Ibn Taymiyya, 7/290, Tab'at Mujamma' al-Malik Fahd, Riyadh, 1426 AH.



liberation of the soul from its material world by way of its return to the spiritual world from which it first emanated.<sup>62</sup>

## Sufism and Gnosticism

Sufism's roots are consistent with the roots of early Gnosticism, which emerged during the Hellenistic period. This tradition based its beliefs on a mixture of ancient Greek philosophy and Eastern religions and pursued its development through the dissemination of its ideas into many other religions and belief systems.<sup>63</sup> "Gnosticism" means spiritual knowledge based on a relationship with God, such that righteousness and salvation involve "knowledge of God" – from which Sufism derives its own term of "Knower of God." The influence of Gnostic concepts on Sufi thought is evident, despite the fact that these concepts were removed from Islamic conceptions and the values of Muslims, who considered the Gnostic concepts to be external to the notion of God's absolute oneness (*tawhid*).<sup>64</sup>

Some Islamic sects found in Gnosticism a justification for their ideas and support for their positions and drew from Gnostic thought after its ideas had been Islamicized. To be sure, Sufis were not the only ones who took refuge in Gnostic thought and made it a central influence on their Islamic thought. In addition to them were the Muslim philosophers and the Batinist sects, chief of which was Isma'ilism.<sup>65</sup>

Islamic Gnosticism was apparent in groups and sects that openly pursued asceticism and isolated themselves from their com-

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<sup>62</sup> See: *al-Takmilah li-Kitab al-Silla*, Ibn al-Abbar al-Quda'i, 2/314, ed. 'Abd al-Salam al-Hurras, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1995; in which Ibn al-Abbar presents excerpts from *Risalat al-I'tibar* under the title *Al-Tabsira* by Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah ibn Massara.

<sup>63</sup> See: *al-Diyana al-Ghnuṣiyya*, Hanis Yufas, trans. Sabah al-Dahisi, Dar Tammuz, Damascus, 2000.

<sup>64</sup> *Al-Ghnuṣiyya fi Mizan al-Fikr al-Islami*, Ahmad 'Abd al-Karim al-Sa'ih, 32, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> See: *Nazariyya al-Ma'rifa fi al-Tasawwuf*, Ahmad 'Abd al-Hamid Ghanim, Dar al-Hiwar, Latakia, 2017.

munities without exhibiting any interest in politics or governance. These groups developed quietly in the shadows and avoided the fate of the “heretical” (*zanadiqa*) Manichaeans, because they did not profess belief in divine incarnation, *ittihad* (mystical union with the divine), and *wahdat al-wujud* until a later time. The first person who professed these Gnostic beliefs was Abu Yazid al-Bistami in the middle of the third century AH.<sup>66</sup>

### Sufism and Indian Religions

Many Muslim scholars have cited the ancient Indian religions among the primary sources of Sufi Muslim thought and behavior. It was Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni who first produced comparative studies of Hindu belief systems such as the Vedanta and Patanjali’s Yoga, as well as of the different Sufi paths represented in the teachings of al-Bistami, al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, and Abu Bakr al-Shibli. Al-Biruni’s many analyses led him to conclude that Sufism borrowed from the Indian religions in many matters, including the question of the soul, the path to salvation, the abolishment of distinctions and the effacement of illusion, reincarnation, and *mujahada* (striving, struggling against the self).<sup>67</sup> Regarding Sufism’s adoption of reincarnation, al-Biruni reported a saying among Sufis that “this world is a sleeping soul, the hereafter is a soul awakened.”<sup>68</sup> As pertains to divine incarnation (*hulul*), Sufis accept the incarnation of God into any bodily creature or inanimate object, which they call “universal manifestation” (*al-zuhur al-kulli*). And as for *fana’* and *ittihad*, according to Sufi beliefs, they occur in the Knower upon reaching the station of *ma’rifa* (knowledge of God), at which point the Knower takes on two spirits: one ancient that knows the unseen, performs miracles, and moves wherever it pleases; and the other human for change and physical constitution.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> *Al-Ghnuṣiyya fi al-Islam*, Hanis Halim, 114 ff., trans. Ra’id al-Bash, Manshurat al-Jamal, Germany, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> Abu al-Rayhan Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Biruni, *Tahqiq ma li-l-Hind min Maqala...*, 1/29, ‘Alim al-Kutub, Beirut, 1986.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 1/22.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 1/30-36.

It is undeniable that Sufism was influenced by the ideas of the Indian religions, and by Brahmanism most specifically. The Sufi doctrine of *fana'*, for example, is purely Indian. The most direct paths to *fana'* – rituals, *mujahada*, repression of desires, and bodily mortification – are themselves well-known methods of the Indian traditions. The Rifa'i order's sanctification of animals and abstinence from killing them, even lice or locusts, is no more than ancient Indian principle of nonviolence called *ahimsa*, one of the central premises of Jainism.<sup>70</sup> It is said of the order's leader, Ahmad al-Rifa'i, that if he came across a pig, he would exclaim, "I bid you good morning!"<sup>71</sup> The Sufi concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Being), meanwhile, is an Indian Brahmanic doctrine that features clearly in ancient Indian religious texts and their attendant philosophies. It was some of Sufism's pivotal figures such as Ibn 'Arabi, al-Hallaj and Suhrawardi who brought the belief into Islamic thought.

The orientalist William Jones compared the poems of Jalal al-Din Rumi and Hafez Shirazi and showed them to have roots in the Indian lyrical poem *Gita Govinda*.<sup>72</sup> The orientalist Max Horten, meanwhile, wrote an article in which he tried to establish, after analyzing the writings of al-Hallaj, al-Bistami, and Abu al-Qasim al-Junayd al-Baghdadi, that Sufism in the third century AH was saturated with ancient Indian ideas, and that the Indian influence was most apparent in the case of al-Hallaj. He concluded that Sufi Islam was heavily influenced by the doctrine of the Vedas, the ancient Indian texts that were translated at the House of Wisdom during the reign of Caliph al-Ma'mun.<sup>73</sup> He contended that Ibn 'Arabi's ideas sur-

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<sup>70</sup> See: *Al-Jantiyya Diyanat al-Karma*, Ahmad Ramadan 'Abd al-'Al, revision and introduction: Mundhir al-Hayik, Khutwat li-l-Nashr, Damascus, 2007.

<sup>71</sup> *Al-Fikr al-Sufi fi Daw' al-Kitab wa-l-Sunna*, 'Abd al-Rahman 'Abd al-Khaliq, 77, Kuwait, 1984; See also: "Al-Dirar al-Suniyya," website, supervision: 'Alawi 'Abd al-Qadir al-Saqqaf, "Mawsu'a al-Firaq al-Islamiyya," Rubric 11: "al-Turuq al-Sufiyya," Chapter 4: "al-Tariqa al-Rifa'iyya," Topic 4: "Anwa' al-Karamat al-Mansuba ila al-Rifa'i w-ila Ghayrihi min Mashayikh al-Rifa'iyya."

<sup>72</sup> *Mawsu'at al-Mustashriqin*, Abdel Rahman Badawi, "William Jones," 291, Dar al-'Ilm li-l-Malayin, Beirut, 1993.

<sup>73</sup> *'Ilm al-Kalam al-Islamiyy fi Dirasat al-Mustashriqin al-Alman*, Haydar Qasim al-Tamimi, 7, Nashrat Bayt al-Hikma, Baghdad, 2001.

rounding the transcendental unity of religions and his belief in the validity of every creed were no more than reiteration of what appears in the Vedas, in which it is written that, “in the end, all these ideas arrive at the essence of God.”<sup>74</sup>

Another orientalist, Richard Hartmann, also established through several studies that Sufi Islam finds its roots in the religions and philosophies of India. He supported his claim in part by observing that most of Sufism’s early figures were non-Arab – Ibrahim ibn Adham, Shaiq al-Balkhi, al-Bistami, and Yahya ibn Mu’adh al-Razi, for example – and that Sufism first emerged in Khorasan. Hartmann added that pre-Islamic Turkestan was at the confluence of Eastern and Western religions and cultures, and when its peoples came into the fold of Islam, they tinged their new faith with their earlier, diverse beliefs. The German orientalist also contended that early Sufi Islam was Indian in its tendencies and methods: that full unconditional surrender is a purely Indian notion, and that the ascetics’ use of nosebags and prayer beads were among the practices of Indian itinerant dervishes. Finally, Hartmann considered that the person most responsible for collecting and introducing these aspects into Sufism was al-Junayd, who died in 297 AH.<sup>75</sup>

The influence of Indian ideas on Sufism is supported by many Sufis’ own recognition that they drew their ideas from the Indian peoples, as well as the frequent travel of Sufi shaykhs to India. One such traveler was al-Bistami, one of the earliest Sufis, who admitted having acquired the concept of *fana’* from Abu ‘Ali al-Sindi, saying, “I befriended Abu ‘Ali al-Sindi. I would instruct him about his religious duty, and in return he would teach me about the unity of being and the pure truths.” Among al-Bistami’s recollections of this friendship, he recounted: “‘Ali Abu ‘Ali al-Sindi entered and he had a bag with him. He dropped it into my hands, and lo and behold, it was the color of jewels! So I said to him, ‘Where did you get this?’ To which he rep-

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<sup>74</sup> *Veda Nusus Hindusiyya Muqaddasa – Dirasa Muqarana*, Mundhir al-Hayik, 213, Dar Safhat, Dubai, 2018.

<sup>75</sup> *Al-Mustashriqun wa-Nasha’at al-Tasawwuf al-Islamiyy*, Muhammad ‘Abd Allah al-Sharqawiyy, 154, Dar Al-Kitab, Cairo, 2014.

lied, 'I came across a riverbed over here, and [the bag] shone like a lamp! And I brought it back from there,' he said. So I asked him, "What did you experience when you arrived at the riverbed?' He said, 'I was in a state of 'from me, by me, for me,' and then I fell into a state of 'from Him, by Him, for Him.'"<sup>76</sup>

Another Sufi figure who traveled frequently to India was al-Hallaj, who did not profess divine incarnation, *ittihad* and *wahdat al-wujud* until after his return from India. According to his son, "He left and was away from us for five years, reaching Transoxiana (*ma wara' al-nahr*) before returning to Persia. He then left for Mecca, before heading to India and Transoxiana a second time. He wrote some books for the peoples there before returning, and they would write to him from India about God."<sup>77</sup> This shows plainly al-Hallaj's sources for divine incarnation and *ittihad*. Another Sufi philosopher, 'Abd al-Haqq ibn Sab'in, loved India and liked to travel there, such that Ibn Taymiyya wrote of him, "A trustworthy source told me that Ibn Sab'in wanted to go to India, and said, 'the land of Islam does not extend there, because in India they are idolaters who worship everything, even plants and animals.'"<sup>78</sup>

Whoever reads the works of Sufis, or observes their religious exercises and practices of *mujahada*, notices the great similarities with the practices of the Indians. This is especially striking in bodily mortification, willful subjection to hardships, starvation, repression of desires, distancing from family and children, isolation in retreats, contemplating the image of the shaykh, the methods of *dhikr*, and many other Sufi practices that resemble nothing so much as they do Indian doctrines, and in which one finds no trace of Islam.

Some have also compared points of similarity between Indian religious concepts and those of Sufi Islam, including:

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<sup>76</sup> *Abu Yazid al-Bistami Sultan al-'Arifin*, Ahmad Farid Al-Mazidi, Dar al-Kutub, al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 1979.

<sup>77</sup> *Al-'Ibar fi Khabr min 'Ibar*, Al-Hafiz al-Dhahabi, 1/455, ed. Muhammad al-Sayyid Zaghlul, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, n.d.

<sup>78</sup> *Majmu'Fatawa ibn Taymiyya*, 1/248, ed. Mustafa 'Ata, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 1981.

- The Sufi *murid* (disciple, aspirant) is the same as the Indian initiate *antevasin*, who progresses to the distinguished stage of *adhikarin*;
- The Sufi who reaches *fana'* is the same as the Indian guru, as both of them lose consciousness as their worldly existence vanishes from them;
- The Sufi dervish's tools – the *khirqā* (Sufi initiatory cloak), *rakwa* (bag), and *'asa* (stick) – are the same ritual tools used by the wandering mendicants in Jainism;
- *Fana'* in Sufism is akin to the Indian Nirvana: they are achieved by the same means and they share the same goal;
- Meditation, reflection, and bodily harm are shared methods for *mujahada* or struggle against the self.<sup>79</sup>

Meanwhile, the rituals and customs and doctrines that the Sufis have derived from Hinduism include: *fana'*; *wahdat al-wujud*; *ittihad*; divine incarnation; relieving shaykhs of all expenses; subjection to hardships; starvation; repression of desires; abandoning earning a living and relying on others; following and aggrandizing a shaykh; and the division of people into an elite and commoners.<sup>80</sup>

Sufism has embraced and developed all this and more, it is present and available to us, yet we have gone searching for spiritual experiences in the temples of the Far East, from Yoga and the like, without noticing the vast cumulated spiritual heritage of Sufism around us. Yet, the paid meditation gatherings that take place today at the highest levels are only a faint shadow of Sufi retreats, which are the greatest and oldest experiences of disciplined meditation.

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<sup>79</sup> *Injil Buda – Dirasa Muqarana*, Mundhir al-Hayik, 216, Dar Safhat, Dubai, 2019.

<sup>80</sup> *Tawrat Brahma – Dirasa Muqarana*, Mundhir al-Hayik, 310, Dar Safhat, Dubai, 2019.

## Sufism and Judaism

Despite the fact that the Jewish religion preceded Islam, we nevertheless find that Jewish Sufism derived entirely from Islamic Sufism and flourished under Arab Muslim rule. Nonetheless, today the shaykhs among what remains of these Jewish Sufis relentlessly call for the destruction of the Arabs and the occupation of their lands. During the Islamic Age, it appears that Muslim and Jewish mystics did more than merely influence each other, but that Judaism and Islam complemented each other in religious philosophy and in spiritual customs over the course of many centuries.<sup>81</sup> Among the manuscripts that were recovered from the *geniza*, or storeroom, of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (known collectively as the Cairo Geniza) were texts penned by Muslim Sufi writers and pious Jews that date back to the Middle Ages. These documents, written in Arabic and Hebrew, all revolve around the field of mysticism and many go back to the age of Rabbi Ibrahim ibn Maymun (Abraham Maimonides, b.1186-d.1236), the son of the philosopher Musa ibn Maymun (Maimonides). Abraham was a prominent religious and political figure, and he was one of the most important followers of the Jewish Sufi method of worship, earning him the nickname *hasid*, meaning “pious.”<sup>82</sup> In his writings, Abraham expresses clear admiration for the Sufis and defined certain biblical figures as being pious, in that they followed the Sufi way. Of the Sufis, he said that “they are the true heirs to the traditions of the Hebrews.” Likewise, he traced some of the most distinctive rituals of the Sufis to the Prophets of the Israelites, adding, “If the Jews have forgotten these spiritual traditions amid the trials and tribulations of exile, they must go back to practicing them.” Rabbi Abraham picked up many Sufi rituals, such as meditative isolation or retreat, and the performing of *dhikr* (remem-

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<sup>81</sup> *Mawsu'at al-Firaq wa-l-Jama'at wa-l-Madhahib al-Islamiyya*, 'Abd al-Mun'im al-Hifni, 322, Dar al-Rashid, Cairo, 1993.

<sup>82</sup> On the life of Abraham, see: *Musa ibn Maymun*, Israel Wilkinson, trans. al-Husayni Mu'addi, Kunuz li-l-Nashr, Cairo, 1999.

branch of God), which he traced back to the Patriarchs of the Old Testament.<sup>83</sup>

Among the reforms that Rabbi Abraham introduced into Judaism were: the ritual washing of hands and feet before praying in synagogue, something not previously imposed; the required organizing of a congregation into regular rows, as is the case for Muslim prayer; as well as facing toward Jerusalem during prayer, just as Muslims face the direction of the *qibla*. He also introduced many motions during prayer, such as kneeling, prostration, standing and raising hands during supplication. More than an isolated case in Egypt, we find many traces of this Sufi Jewish approach among the Jews of al-Andalus before their expulsion and among the Jews of Damascus, Yemen, Palestine, and Persia.<sup>84</sup>

The Jewish Sufis who followed Rabbi Ibrahim Abu al-'Afia (b.1291 - d.1240) espoused a number of rituals practiced by Muslim Sufis. One of these rituals was *wajd* (spiritual ecstasy), the state of spiritual rapture that occurs when the *murid* performs *dhikr*, where God's name is repeated until the individual reaches the loss of consciousness that is *wajd*. Other borrowed rituals are found in the *adhkar* of *Hazkara*, breath control, and the headshaking motion known as shuckling.

The Kabbalist orders<sup>85</sup> for their part took to reciting poems of in the manner of Sufi chants and forming circles of *muridin* around their shaykh as they perform their movements and supplications. Many of them have also gone into isolation for worship and meditation, just as in the Sufi retreat. It is believed that these rituals were not known to Judaism prior to the Middle Ages.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Jami' Faharis al-Thiqat*, Muhammad ibn Hibban, 10/316, ed. Husayn Zahran, Mu'asisat al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, Beirut, 1981.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 10/318.

<sup>85</sup> Kabbala: Jewish Mysticism that consists of spiritualisms and philosophies that explain life, the universe, and God. Emerged among Jews but appeared among Christians in Europe during the Renaissance. The term means "reception" and "acceptance."

<sup>86</sup> *Al-Sufi al-Yahudi – Sefer HaZohar*, Yahya Dhikra, 19, Dar al-Shaqri li-l-Nashr, 2017.



## Sufism and Christian Monasticism

Jesus the Messenger of God is an important symbol in most Sufi orders, especially those that profess *hulul* and *ittihad*. The Messiah holds great importance in Sufism because he is a symbol of the unity of the Creator with His creation. Those among Sufis who profess *ittihad* and divine incarnation go beyond most Muslims' belief that God Almighty created Jesus from His spirit, believing that God was incarnated in him. That is why al-Hallaj spoke of *lahut* (divinity, divine nature) and *nasut* (humanity, human nature) as the Christians do, writing:

*Glory be to He who revealed in His humanity  
the secret of His piercing divinity.<sup>87</sup>*

It is commonly said that what unites Islamic mysticism and Christian monasticism is the search to encounter God. But in Sufism, God is everything, there is no existence outside of Him, such that His creations – humans included – have no entity unto themselves. In Christian monasticism, however, human creation has a real, not simply illusory, existence: that is, God's existence does nullify human existence. Christian monks hold the view that they are connected to God through the bond of love, and not through a dissolution into the essence of God that Sufis call *fana'*. But, in the eyes of the Sufi Muslim, the disappearance of the self means no more than what it meant to the Apostle Paul when he said, "With Christ I was crucified, such that it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me."<sup>88</sup>

In the first centuries of the spread of Christianity, pious Christians were themselves so eager to sacrifice in order to prove their love for Jesus Christ that they trended towards asceticism and austerity. The persecutions that they suffered further contributed to the rise of monasticism, as they led them to flee into the wilderness for

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<sup>87</sup> *Diwan al-Hallaj*, Commentary: Muhammad Basil 'Uyun al-Sud, 131, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 2013.

<sup>88</sup> Saint Paul the Apostle, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 2:20.

fear that these persecutions might cause them to repudiate their faith. The early Christians also felt called to abstain from everything worldly for the sake of eternal life, responding to Jesus' admonition that "every one of you who does not give up his possessions cannot be a disciple of mine" (Luke 14:33).

The symmetry between Christian monks and Sufis is most clear in their appearance. Monks adopted the habit as a distinguishing symbol, while Sufis earned their name from the woolen habits they wore, "*suf*" meaning "wool" in Arabic. The symmetry in demeanor is apparent in their withdrawal from society and solitary worship, as well as the admiration and respect that the moderation and simple ways of monastic life have always elicited among Sufis. This positive view of monks among Muslim ascetics was encouraged by the Qur'an, which makes a warm mention of priests and monks: {You will find that the nearest people in friendship to the believers are those who say, 'We are Christian.' This is because they have priests and monks among them, and they are not arrogant} (Qur'an 5:82). The similarity also extends to Sufis' adoption of *khanqawat* and *zawaya* (places of gathering or retreat for Sufi orders) to worship and isolate themselves from the world, which resemble monasteries or the hermitages that monks would build far from inhabited spaces.

It appears that many visits and discussions took place between Sufi shaykhs and Christian monks, and they would listen and learn from them without interruption. Some historians of Christianity mention that monks and itinerant worshipers, primarily Nestorians, managed to initiate Sufi Muslims into many of their customs and traditions, a fact supported by Ibrahim ibn Adham, who wrote that he "learned *ma'rifa* from a monk called Simon."<sup>89</sup>

Malik ibn Dinar would visit monasteries and read the Bible, and he said about this: "I was fond of looking through books and I entered a monastery, and they took out a book of theirs and I looked at it, and in it I found: "Oh son of Adam, why do you seek knowledge

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<sup>89</sup> *Itihaf al-Sada al-Mutaqin bi-Sharh Ahia' Ulum al-Din*, Murtada Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Zabidi, 10/214, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 1998.

of that which you do not know, when you do not act on that which you do know?" And he would quote the words of Jesus Christ, saying: "Jesus son of Mary and his disciples passed the carcass of a dog, and the disciples said, 'How foul is its smell!' But Jesus said, 'How white are his teeth!'"<sup>90</sup> The same is true of the Sufi Farqad ibn Ya'qub al-Sabakhi who would quote sayings that indicated his familiarity with the Bible, for example: "Whoever becomes sad about his worldly existence is in fact resentful of his Lord, and whoever sits with a rich man and abases himself to him loses two-thirds of his religion.<sup>91</sup> And whoever suffers a calamity and complains about it to people, it is as though he is complaining about his Lord Almighty."

Meanwhile, Dhul-Nun al-Misri would often speak with monks, and he declared that he was impacted by an expression in Aramaic that says, "The assessors assess and fate laughs."<sup>92</sup> In fact, Sufis introduced many Aramaic expressions borrowed from these months into their vocabulary and their *isharat*, such as: *lahut*, *rahmut* (mercy), *rahbut* (fear), *jabrut* (omnipotence), *rabbani* (divine), *ruhani* (spiritual), *nafsani* (psychological), *juthmani* (bodily, corporeal), *sha'sha'ani* (sparkling), *fardaniyya* (God's singularity), *kayfufiyya* (the quality of God).

## Conclusion

Sufi thought has indeed embraced and reflects all of the intellectual, religious, and philosophical influences and interlacements discussed above. Islamic mysticism is distinctive in its inclusivity and unprecedented diversity, such that the experience of al-Hallaj was not that of Ibn 'Arabi nor that of al-Suhrawardi. If Sufism had been influenced by a single source, there could be no such diversity of experiments in Sufism, which resulted in Sufi orders that are genuine

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<sup>90</sup> *Hilyat al-Awliya' wa-Tabaqat al-Asfia'*, al-Hafiz Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Isfanahi, 2/375, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1985.

<sup>91</sup> *Tarikh al-Islam*, Shams al-Din al-Dhahabi, 3/564, ed. Mustafa 'Ata, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, 2006.

<sup>92</sup> *Hilyat al-Awliya' wa-Tabaqat al-Asfia'*, al-Hafiz Ahmad ibn 'Abd Allah al-Isfanahi, 9/256, Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 2001.

pedagogies of mysticism. We are inclined to emphasize the extent to which Sufism is able to serve as a bridge for dialogue between religions and civilizations. In the vastness of its tolerant thought lies the possibility of overcoming much of the negativity that has been attached to Islam through ignorance and biased interests. Perhaps then would we be better prepared to answer to the question: can we consider Sufism a universal spiritual doctrine, which has drawn from everyone and is fit for everyone?



# **THE *ABDAL* IN SUFISM**

## **Evolution of the Concept and Its Religious, Political and Social Implications**

*Dr. Mohamad Yousri Abu Hadur*

Over the centuries, many names with political or spiritual overtones have received great respect and veneration in Islamic culture. One such name is that of the *abdal*, which is an elusive term, with no consensus on its interpretation.

In the early period of Islamic history, this word was connected to the political struggle over the caliphate, rule, and authority. Over time, as circumstances and the political and intellectual contexts changed, the significance of the term changed, and the word acquired a mystical and spiritual charge.

This paper aims to answer a series of questions on the evolution of the concept of the *abdal* in Sufism and its religious, political and social significance. What does the concept mean? How did it arise? How do Sufi scholars interpret it? Does it still exist in Sufi thought today? What is the position of other schools and scholars on the concept?

### **1. The concept of the *abdal*: linguistic and terminological meaning**

Most Arabic dictionaries agree on one of the meanings of the word *abdal*, and on its trilateral root (b-d-l), restricting it to the sense of changing a thing to a similar or equivalent thing. For example, one dictionary includes the following definitions under the root: “the replacing of a thing, or the changing of a thing without substitution; to take a thing as a substitute, or in exchange for another, or in the place

of another; the act of exchanging with another or others..."<sup>93</sup> Another states: "The substitute (for something): something other than the thing...one man could say to another: 'Take this person with you,' and he responds: 'I have a substitute for him,' i.e., a man with the same worth to be in his place; also, to become changed or altered, to take a thing as a substitute or in exchange for another or in the place of another.... Removing or displacing the substance of a thing and introducing another substance..."<sup>94</sup>

The terminological meaning of the term can be summarized as stated by Abu Bakr al-Razi: "The *abdal* are a group of the *salihin* (righteous) who never leave this world; if one dies God puts another in his place."<sup>95</sup> This meaning is based on a collection of hadith, narratives, and traditions that contain the word *abdal* in one form or another and are attributed to the Prophet and a number of companions (*al-sahaba*) and successors (*tabi'un*).

Although the word *abdal* is not found in the books of hadith collected by al-Bukhari and Muslim—the most important of such books among Sunnis, the term occurs frequently in several sources respected by Sunnis. Such sources include the *Musannaf* of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani, *Al-Mu'jam al-Awsat* by al-Tabarani, the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, and other historical and hadith literature.

For example, the term appears in the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855) in a number of places, including a narrative attributed to the Prophet himself, in which he says: "There are thirty *abdal* in this *umma* like Ibrahim Khalil al-Rahman. Every time one dies, God puts another man in his place."<sup>96</sup> In another narrative attributed to 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, when requested by some of his soldiers to curse the soldiers of *al-Sham* (Syria) who came out to fight him in the

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<sup>93</sup> Zayn al-Din Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr al-Hanafi Al-Razi (d. 666/1267), *Mukhtar al-Sihah*, 5th Ed., al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, Beirut, 1999, Vol. 1, p. 30-31

<sup>94</sup> Jamal al-Din ibn Manzur al-Ansari (d. 711/1311), *Lisan al-'Arab*, 3rd Ed., Dar Sadir, Beirut, 1414/1993, Vol. 2, p. 39

<sup>95</sup> Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr al-Hanafi al-Razi, *Mukhtar al-Sihah*, Vol. 1, p. 31

<sup>96</sup> *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, Cordoba Institute, Cairo, n.d., Vol. 5, p. 322, Hadith No. 22803

Battle of Siffin in 37/657, the fourth caliph refused their request, stating, "I heard the Messenger of God say: "The *abdāl* are in Syria, and they are forty men. Every time one dies, God puts another man in his place. By them the rain is sent and through them victory is achieved against the enemy and punishment is warded off from the people of Syria."<sup>97</sup>

Ibn Abi al-Dunya (d. 281/894) also reports that Ali ibn Abi Talib asked the Prophet about the *abdāl* and the Prophet told him: "They are sixty men... they are not extremists, nor heretics, nor do they act with forced hardness. They did not obtain this through frequent fasting, nor prayer, nor almsgiving, but through generosity of self, soundness of heart, and the counsel of their imams. In my nation, Ali, they are rarer than red phosphorus."<sup>98</sup>

Similarly, 'Ala' al-Din al-Muttaqi al-Hindi (d. 975/1567) mentions a collection of prophetic hadith on the *abdāl* that are traced back to the prophet, including: "There are forty *abdāl*, twenty-two in *al-Sham* (Syria) and eighteen in Iraq. Every time one of them dies, God puts another in his place. If they all die, it is the Last Day."<sup>99</sup> The collection also includes: "There are still forty men from my *umma* with hearts like that of Ibrahim; God uses them to protect the people of the earth, they are called the *abdāl*; they do not attain this through prayer nor through fasting nor through almsgiving..."<sup>100</sup>

## 2. Evolution of the concept of the *abdāl* in Sufi culture

The Sufi meaning of the term *abdāl* has passed through several different stages. In each stage, the connotation of the term has differed, as has its connection with the concepts, influences, and interactions with that era's collective Sufi imaginary.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., Vol. 1, p. 112, Hadith No. 898

<sup>98</sup> *Al-Awliya'*, critical edition by Abu Hagir Muhammad, al-Sa'id ibn Basyuni Zaghulul, Mu'assasa al-Kutub al-Thaqafiyya, Beirut, 1993, Vol. 4, p. 12

<sup>99</sup> *Kanz al-Ummal fi Sunan al-Aqwal wa-l-Afal*, critical edition by Safwat al-Saqa, Bakri al-Hayani, Mu'assasa al-Risala, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 6, p. 86, Hadith No. 34604

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. Vol. 6, p. 86, Hadith No. 34607



The early treatment of the term *abdal* in Sufism was not distinctly different in signification or use from the direct meanings by which the term was understood in Sunni literature in general. This can be seen in some statements attributed to prominent Sufi figures in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries AH.

For example, Ma'ruf al-Karkhi (d. 200/815), explains the path for attaining the rank of *abdal*, saying: "Who said: God have mercy on Muhammed's *umma*, God comfort Mohammed's *umma*, every day three times, God will make him one of the *abdal*."<sup>101</sup> Sari al-Saqati (d. 251/867) speaks of the moral traits of the *abdal*, saying "The *abdal* have four moral traits: seeking piety, correcting the will, accepting others and offering counsel thereto."<sup>102</sup> Similar to this is Yahya ibn Mu'adh al-Razi's (d. 258/871) statement: "If you see a man doing good things, know that he is following the path of piety; if you see him reciting the verses of God, know that he is on the path of the *abdal*."<sup>103</sup>

This conventional and direct understanding of the term *abdal* appears more than once in one of the most significant early books on Sufi orders in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. This book is *Ṭabaqat al-ṣufiyya* by Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 412/1021), where the term *abdal* is used routinely, without any specification or distinction, and without any overt effort to attribute supernatural powers and the ability to perform God's miracles to the *abdal*.

The meaning of the term remained stable in Sufism for a long period of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH (8<sup>th</sup> century AD). However, rapid changes in Sufi culture due to the influence of Persian, Syriac, and Greek philosophy in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AH,<sup>104</sup> gave rise to a Sufi inclina-

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<sup>101</sup> Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Husayni Murtada al-Zabidi (d. 1205/1790), *Ithaf al-Sada al-Muttaqin bi-Sharh Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 7, p. 248

<sup>102</sup> Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, *Ṭabaqat al-Sufiyya*, 2nd Ed., critical edition by Ahmad al-Sharbasi, Kitab al-Sha'b, Cairo, 1998, p. 20

<sup>103</sup> Hasan Al-Sharqawi, *Mu'jam Alfaz al-Sufiyya*, Mu'assasat Mukhtar li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', Cairo, 1987, p. 22

<sup>104</sup> Massignon and Mustafa 'Abd al-Raziq, *al-Tasawwuf*, Lajna Tarjama Dar al-Ma'arif al-Islamiyya, Dar al-Kitab al-Libnani, Beirut, 1984, p. 39

tion toward building a new terminological system in line with intellectual and cultural developments. Against that polemical background, the term *abdal* conveyed new meanings significantly different from their first early significations, and the term fell into what can be described as the trap of Sufi appropriation.

The Sufi appropriation of the term took place through the inclusion of the term *abdal* in another more general and comprehensive conceptual scope, in which it meant “*rijal al-ghaib*,” which is a purely Sufi term that refers to a group of designated men possessing status, knowledge, and faithwhom God has distinguished with supernatural abilities, who in Sufism have broad influence on creatures and beings in the unseen world.<sup>105</sup>

The concept of *rijal al-ghaib*, and with it the Sufi signification of the term *abdal*, started to follow the Sufi line that evolved over successive centuries. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century AH, the Sufi Abu Bakr al-Kattani (d. 322/934) mentioned the *abdal* and included among their other functions the responsibility of meeting people’s needs.<sup>106</sup> Abu Talib al-Makki (d. 386/996) asserted the same meaning at the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AH.<sup>107</sup>

In the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century AH (mid-12<sup>th</sup> century AD), the Sufi signification of the term took a new and important step with the most famous spiritual leader (*qutb*) ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 561/1166). Al-Jilani interpreted the *abdal* as *awliya*’ (saints)—who were nearly

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<sup>105</sup> One of the most significant proofs used in Sufism to establish its special concept of the term *rijal al-ghaib*, is the *marf*’ hadith contained in al-Tabarani’s *al-Mu’jam al-Kabir*: “If one of you loses something, or if one of you wants help and you are in a land where there are no people, say: ‘O servants of God, help me, O servants of God, help me.’ For God has servants we do not see.”

Abu al-Qasim Al-Ṭabarani (d. 360/971), *al-Mu’jam al-kabir*, 2nd Ed., critical edition by Hamdi ibn ‘Abd al-Majid al-Sulafi, Maktabat ibn Taymiyya, Cairo, n.d., Vol. 17, p. 117

<sup>106</sup> Ibn Manzur, *Mukhtasar Ta’rikh Dimashq*, Dar al-Fikr li-l-Tiba’a wa-l-Tawzi’ wa-l-nashr, Damascus, 1984, Vol. 1, p. 116

<sup>107</sup> *Qut al-Qulub fi Mu’amalat al-Mahbub wa Wasf Tariq al-Murid ila Maqam al-Tawhid*, critical edition, introduction, and annotations by Mahmoud Ibrahim Mohamed al-Radwani, Maktabat Dar al-Turath, Cairo, 2001, p. 447-448

infallible—as their will has been replaced with the will of God, and their sins limited to “if, in the event of forgetfulness and overwhelming emotion and fear, they associate their own will with the will of God, God the Great comes to their help with His mercy by reminding and awakening them, so that they return from their forgetfulness and seek the protection of their Lord...”<sup>108</sup>

Here it is important to note that the intellectual background against which al-Jilani based his theory of the concept of the *abdal* was one of intense intellectual debate, a theological Mu‘tazili-Ash‘ari debate on the issue of free will and divine justice on the one side, and a doctrinal Sunni-Shi‘i debate on the issue of the infallibility of imams on the other.

In the fourth stage of the evolution of the Sufi treatment of the term *abdal*, the Sufi line increased and grew gradually. It reached its height in the Mamluk and Ottoman eras, when the hierarchical Sufi orders were established and organized and each order was given a comprehensive hierarchical structure, wherein abilities and powers were distributed systematically.

Al-Shaykh al-Akbar, Muḥyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi (d. 638/1240), is among the great Sufi figures who took an interest in establishing the Sufi hierarchy. In doing this, he relied above all on the spiritual aspect. Ibn ‘Arabi placed great significance on the old terms that describe the righteous, such as *aqtab* (poles), *awtad* (pillars), *abdal*, *aghwath* (helpers), and the like.

In his great work *al-Futuḥat al-Makkiyya*, Ibn ‘Arabi specified the number of the *abdal* as forty, mentioning that some are men and some women. He declared that seven of the *abdal* are entrusted with preserving the seven regions of the world and he likened them to the prophets Ibrahim, Musa, Haroun, Idris, Yusuf, Issa, and Adam. Ibn ‘Arabi stated that these seven *abdal* “know the secrets that God Almighty placed in the planets with regard to their movement and dis-

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<sup>108</sup> ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, *Futuh al-Ghaib*, critical edition by ‘Asim ‘Ibrahim al-Kiali, al-Hussaini al-Shadhili al-Darqawi, Kuttub Nashirun, Beirut, n.d., p. 22

tant locations.”<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Ibn ‘Arabi stated the names of some *abdal* whom he met or heard of, mentioning among them Musa al-Sadrani, Muhammad ibn Ashraf al-Randi, and Mu‘adh ibn Ashras.<sup>110</sup>

There are several important points to note regarding what Ibn ‘Arabi said about the *abdal*:

1. He placed the *abdal* on the fourth tier of the Sufi hierarchy, after the *qutb*, imams, and the *awtad*, and before both the *nujaba’* (nobles) and the *nuqaba’* (leaders).

2. The Sufi hierarchy established by Ibn ‘Arabi in *al-Futuhat* was largely similar to that of the Isma‘ili *da‘wa* (call) several centuries prior, which shows the influence of the foundations and methodology of the Nizari-Isma‘ili *da‘wa* that spread throughout Iran and Syria in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH over Ibn ‘Arabi and other Sufis.

3. Ibn ‘Arabi’s statements on the *abdal* spread with great force within intellectual circles in Syria. Even some scholars outside the Sufi sphere named some of the men in their works and alluded to them as being *abdal*.<sup>111</sup>

4. Ibn ‘Arabi’s statement that women can be *abdal* emphasizes the great change the concept of the *abdal* underwent in this age, and how it was deeply impacted by the tolerant view practiced by Ibn ‘Arabi.

5. Although Ibn ‘Arabi established this hierarchy, it did not spread extensively in the Sufi philosophical line that tended toward the assertion of unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*). Rather, Ibn ‘Arabi’s hierarchy made its way to Sufi orders that tended toward the Sunni line that spread throughout Egypt and Syria in particular.

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<sup>109</sup> *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Dar Sadir, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 2, p. 7

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, Vol. 2, p. 7

<sup>111</sup> Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi (d. 774/1373), *al-Bidaya wa-l-nihaya*, Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 7, p. 127

6. Muḥyi al-Din Ibn ‘Arabi was one of the most important Sufi figures who interpreted hadith about the *abdal* within the Sufi paradigm. He was also among the first Sufis to attribute supernatural qualities to them. With him, the *abdal* came to possess supernatural powers and the ability to perform unlimited miracles, beyond logic and reason.

Ibn ‘Arabi interpreted the name *abdal* as being due to their supernatural nature: “If they leave a place and want to create a substitute for them in that place... they leave a person there who resembles them to the extent that no person who sees such person would doubt that they are the same man, yet it is not him but a spiritual person that he leaves as a substitute...”<sup>112</sup>

‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani (d. 973/1565) and Muhammad ‘Abd al-Ra‘uf al-Munawi (d. 1031/1622), both prominent Sufis who narrated the lives of shaykhs and ascetics, told dozens of miraculous stories about the *abdal* in their works. These stories were in line with the statements made in Ibn ‘Arabi’s *al-Futuhat*. Among such stories is one al-Sha‘rani mentions in the biography of Shaykh Muhammad al-Hadri: “He was seen in several towns at the same time”. He even preached the Friday sermon one day in his town, “then some of the people from neighboring towns came and the people of each town said that he had preached to them and led them in prayer. He said: “That day we counted thirty such sermons, while we could see him sitting with us in our town.”<sup>113</sup>

And al-Munawi stated: “If an *abdal* departs from a place, he leaves in his place a spiritual reality; the souls of that place go to him, and if the people of this place miss him greatly the spiritual reality

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<sup>112</sup> *Al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*, Dar sadir, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 2, p. 7

<sup>113</sup> ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani (d. 973/1565), *Lawaqih al-Anwar al-Qudsiyya fi Manaqib al-‘Ulama’ wa-l-Sufiyya (Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra)*, critical edition by Ahmad ‘Abd al-Rahim al-Sayih, Tawfiq Ali Wahba, Maktaba al-Thaqafa al-Diniyya, Cairo, 2005, p. 94

that he left in his place can materialize before them, speak to them, and they may speak to him, while he's not there."<sup>114</sup>

7. Despite the clear difference in the qualities and numbers of the *abdal*, most Sufi narratives contained in the famous Sufi hierarchies—including Ibn 'Arabi's—state that they are from *al-Sham* (Syria), and that they are seven men or forty men. There are more disputes on their qualities and why they are distinguished and preferred over other Muslims.

It is likely that the two numbers, seven and forty, were mentioned as an exaggeration or for the significant symbolic meanings of these numbers, given the influence of the ancient cultural and mythological contexts of ancient Near East.

The number seven has held great symbolism since the dawn of history. It represented the number of the days of the week, and the widespread belief in the existence of seven regions. Those meanings were emphasized in Islamic culture through the hadith on the seven earths and seven heavens, and other rituals or rites present in many of the schools of Islam.

If we go back to ancient Egyptian mythology, we find the considerable presence of the number forty. It was commonly believed that the god Set tore Osiris's body into forty pieces, and that Osiris rose from the dead forty days after his death. The symbolism of the number forty is also strong in the Christian imaginary. The Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years after their Exodus from Egypt. Lent is forty days, and the number forty represents the period the Christ spent between the resurrection and the ascension into heaven. There is also the sacred forty-day period following the an individual's death when the family is called upon perform special mourning rituals to pray and seek mercy for the departed, known as *al-arba'in*.

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<sup>114</sup> *Fayd al-Qadir Sharh al-Jami' al-Saghir min Ahadith al-Bashir al-Nadhir*, 2nd Ed., Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, 1972, Vol. 3, p. 169

When considering the evolution of the term *abdal* and its manifestations at the political and social levels in the countries of Islam, it is important not to overlook the appearance of a Sufi order known as the order of the *abdals* in the Anatolian region in the 8<sup>th</sup> century AH (13<sup>th</sup> century AD), at the time of the emergence of the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the mystery surrounding the beginnings of this order, a number of researchers have said that the term *abdal* was used for the Qalandariyya, a Sufi movement that was widespread in Iran and Central Asia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. The followers of that order, established by the Iranian Sufi Jamal al-Din Sawi (d. 631/1233), had used the name *abdal* for the deep positive spiritual meanings and connotations the word held in the Sufi understanding.<sup>115</sup> The term *abdal* in particular was the Sufi term most in harmony with the beliefs of that sect, given the acceptance of certain problematic issues, such as *tana-sukh* (reincarnation), *hulul* (incarnation) and *ittihad* (union with the divine) that can be understood from it. These were all issues familiar to them from the sacred beliefs of the Turkman shamanism of their ancestors. These issues were also in line with some of the Shi'i beliefs prevailing in areas of Iran. It is notable that the beliefs followed by the Qalandariyya sect or the *abdal* were met with strong disapproval in Iran, and "Iranians called the dervishes who deviated from religion *abdal*."<sup>116</sup>

After the spread of the *abdal* to Anatolia with the heavy migration of Turkmen in that period, the Babai movement was established, which relied greatly on mobilizing the idea of the *abdal*. The Babai entered into a losing revolution against the Rum Seljuk Sultanate in east and central Anatolia, where many Turkmen tribes were residing in the rugged mountain regions far from the political influence of the Sultanate.

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<sup>115</sup> Badi'a Muhammad 'Abd al-'Al, *al-Fikr al-Batini fi al-Anadul*, "al-Imam 'Ali fi Mu'ataqidat al-Biktashiyya Namudhijan," al-Dar al-Thaqafiyya li-l-Nashr, Cairo, 2010, p. 15

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p. 15

The most important development with regard to the term *abdal* in Anatolia after the Babai defeat was that the remnants of the Qalandariyya and other Sufi orders and sects close to Shi'ism joined together under one of the greatest and most important saints known in Anatolia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, Haji Bektash Veli (d. 670/1270).

In the age of Haji Bektash Veli's successors, the term *abdal* was used without qualification for Bektashi shaykhs, and the *abdal* order became one of the orders supporting the Ottomans in their jihad against the British. One of the most prominent of these shaykhs was Abdel Musa. Abdel Musa met the Sultan Orhan Ghazi, provided him with counsel and assistance, and attended the Siege of Bursa, where his grave is well known. Several miracles have been attributed to him, which confirms his high status and standing.<sup>117</sup>

### 3. The contemporary Sufi view of the *abdal*: symbolism and social and political dimensions

Many contemporary Sufis share their forbearers' belief that the *abdal* have supernatural powers. One describes the *abdal* as follows: "The qualities of this class of *awliya'* is that you cannot judge them by the images in which they appear. Meaning that if you caused one any harm, this would have no effect on the original. The sensory representation that is seen by the eyes is like the immaterial representation that is seen in a dream. If one appeared in a dream and someone struck them with a knife, their blood would flow; yet this would leave no trace on your real enemy."<sup>118</sup>

The contemporary popular Sufi understanding is that the *abdal* are a category of advanced saints. There is no emphasis on them being conceptualized in a manner contrary to their ordinary nature, as this would be a clear contradiction of science and logic.

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<sup>117</sup> 'Issam al-Din Ahmad Tashkubri[zadah] (d. 968/1560), *al-Shaqa'iq al-Nu'maniyya fi 'Ulama'al-Dawla al-'Uthmaniyya*, critical edition by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Shahin, Dar al-kutub al-'ilmiyya, Beirut, n.d., p. 19

<sup>118</sup> Ahmad Hijab, *al-'Iza wa-l-'I'tibar: Ara' fi Hayat al-Sayyid al-Badawi al-Dunyawiyya wa-Hayatihi al-Barzakhiiyya*, Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, Cairo, 1386/1966, p. 41



Among the miracles commonly attributed to the *abdal* by Sufis in contemporary times, is that they play a large role in protecting and blessing countries and protecting the peace of their people.<sup>119</sup> It seems these beliefs in particular have increased in recent years with the escalating pace of the civil war and the upheavals in Syria, which is seen as the homeland and stronghold of the *abdal*. Connected to this are several contemporary shaykhs and Sufis in Syria, some of whom are said to be *abdal*. These include Ahmad al-Harun, Badr al-Din al-Hussayni, Salim al-Miswati, Sa'id al-Habbal,<sup>120</sup> Shukri al-Lahhafi, and 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri.

Similarly, in the stories of the *abdal*, certain leaders and heads of Sufi orders are mentioned, some of whom are descendants of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, as performing miracles in line with contemporary circumstances.<sup>121</sup>

The strong significance and powerful symbolism of the term *abdal* is also present in modern Sufism in some special prayers. One of the most well-known is the prayer of *rijal al-ghayb*, which says: "Peace be upon you, O *rijal al-ghayb*, lifting the veil of darkness, O sacred souls, *Oimaman* (the two assistants of the qutb), O *afrad* (incomparables), O *abdal*, O *nuqaba'* (leaders), O *umana'* (guardians), O *nujaba'* (nobles), O *hawariun* (disciples), O Great *qutb*, help me, see me, help me with the tests of this world and the world to come, under the sanctity of the Lord of the two universes and the Prophet of the *thaqalayn* (two objects of high estimation and care), prayers be upon our Prophet Muhammed and all prophets and messengers, praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds."

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<sup>119</sup> A video titled "Talib al-Nazra min al-Shaykh Shukri al-Lahfi Ahad Abdal al-Sham", watched on 26/2/2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pcSIz9q7EU>

<sup>120</sup> Yusuf al-Mar'ashli, *Nathr al-Jawahir wa-l-Durar fi 'Ulama' al-Qarn al-Rabi' 'Ashr*, Dar al-Ma'rifa, Beirut, 2006, p. 192

<sup>121</sup> For more, see 'Abd al-Majid ibn Taha al-Dahibi al-Za'abi al-Jilani, *Ithaf al-Akabar fi-Sira wa-Manaqib al-Imam Muhyi al-Din 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani al-Hussayni*, Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, Beirut, n.d., p. 495

Seeking the assistance of the *abdal* is also found in the *awrad* (spiritual practices) of the majority of modern Sufi orders.<sup>122</sup> It is also found more clearly and in greater concentration in some of the *awrad* of the al-Jilani order, where *al-Fatiha* is read seven times before the set recitation (*wird*), and one of those readings is for *rijal al-ghayb*.<sup>123</sup> The same tradition exists in the Rifa'i order.<sup>124</sup>

Thus, the modern Sufi meaning of the term *abdal* has expanded. It has been linked with several words from the prevailing social and political contexts and interpreted in line with modern reality to ensure that it is protected with the weight of a sacred dogmatism, with a focus on its spiritual content in attempt to distance it from clashing with settled scientific facts and certainties.

#### 4. The *abdal* outside the Sufi paradigm

Despite the prevalence of hadith and traditions that mention the *abdal* and tie them to the people of Syria in particular, many Sunni scholars—including those distant from Sufism in particular—have refused to authenticate such hadith, judging them weak and dismissing them, deeming them stories and lies. Among the most famous of these is Ibn Taymiyya al-Harrani (d. 728/1328), who answered a question he was asked about *rijal al-ghayb* as follows: “As for the names circulating on the tongues of many ascetics and people, such as *al-Ghawth* in Mecca...and the forty *abdal*...these names are not found in the book of God Almighty, nor are they reported by the Prophet, May God’s peace and blessings be upon him, with authentic (*sahih*), not weak (*da’if*) chains of transmission...”<sup>125</sup> His famous stu-

<sup>122</sup> ‘Abd al-Majid ibn Taha al-Dahibi, *Kunuz al-Asrar wa-l-Ma’ani min Ahzab wa Ad’iyya al-Sada al-Aqtab wa-l-Qutb al-Jilani*, p. 16

<sup>123</sup> Article titled “Da’wa Rijal al-Ghayb wa-l-Ghawth al-Qutb Sahib al-Zaman,” accessed on 26/2/2020, [http://alanwar-alqadria.blogspot.com/2013/03/blog-post\\_5053.html?m=1](http://alanwar-alqadria.blogspot.com/2013/03/blog-post_5053.html?m=1)

<sup>124</sup> Website of al-Qutb Ahmad al-Rifa’i, accessed on 26/2/2020, <https://alrefaee.wordpress.com/about/>

<sup>125</sup> *Majmu’ al-Fatawa*, critical edition by ‘Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad bin Qasim, King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Quran, Medina, 1995, Vol. 11, p.434

dent Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), shared this opinion, stating: “Those hadith of the *abdal*, the *aqtab*, the *aghwath*, the *nuqaba’*, the *nujaba’*, the *awtad*, all are false.”<sup>126</sup> This was responded to by some later Sufis in a number of works.<sup>127</sup>

In the modern era, the Lebanese scholar Muhammad Rashid Rida (d. 1354/1935) was among the first to allude to the political dimension in the hadith of the *abdal*, saying that such hadith had appeared and spread during the age of the Umayyad Caliphate and that those who promoted them had spread them in attempt to strengthen the people of *al-Sham* (Syria) and tip the scale in the civil war that was taking place between them and the people of Iraq.

Similarly, Rashid Rida responded to a question he had received on such hadith, saying: “I know that these hadith are false, in their narration, logic, *sanad* (chain of narrators), and *matn* (text).”<sup>128</sup> According to Rida, many of these hadith were established due to the common occurrence where “the supporters and leaders of each state narrate that which increases the *umma’s* confidence in the state, and this hadith refers to praising the people of *al-Sham*, supporters of the Umayyad dynasty ...”<sup>129</sup> Among those who agreed with Rida’s statement was the contemporary Egyptian Azhari researcher Mahmoud Abu Rayya, who emphasized that the Umayyad dynasty sycophants were the ones who produced those hadith in order to elevate its state and grant it a kind of political legitimacy.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> *Al-Manar al-Munif fi-l-Sahih wa-l-Da’if*, critical edition by ‘Abd al-Fatah Abu Ghida, Maktabat al-Matbu’at al-Islamiyya, Aleppo, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 136

<sup>127</sup> The assertion of the existence of the *abdal* and their great position received strong support by later Sufi figures who responded to the doubts raised by Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim, and others. For example, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505) compiled a book on the authenticity of the hadiths of the *rijal al-ghayb* in general, including the *abdal*, and called it “al-Khabar al-Dal ‘ala Wujud al-Qutb wa-l-Awtad wa-l-Nujaba’ wa-l-Abdal” (the researcher)

<sup>128</sup> *Al-Manar*, Vol. 27 (1926), p. 748

<sup>129</sup> *Al-Manar*, Vol. 27 (1926), p. 748

<sup>130</sup> *Adwa’ ‘ala al-Sunna al-Muhammadiyah*, 5th Edition, Sharika al-A’alami li-l-Matbu’at, Beirut, n.d., p. 135

If we look for the meaning of the concept of the *abdal* in the Shi'i paradigm, we find that this concept did not enter the culture of Twelver Shi'ism until a relatively later stage than the Sunni paradigm. Thus, it was natural for its meaning and connotation to differ, although it did continue to preserve its clear political dimension. All narratives that linked the *abdal* and the people of *al-Sham* (Syria) who were supporters of the Umayyad dynasty were rejected. If equivalent narratives appeared, there was an attempt to try to find a relation between the *abdal* and the vocabulary of the Shi'i paradigm in one form or another.

For example, there are some views that make "*abdal*" one of the titles of the Twelver imams, based on the transmission of Abu Mansour Ahmad ibn 'Ali ibn Abi Talib al-Tabrasi, a scholar from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH, from the eighth imam, 'Ali al-Rida: "The *abdal* legates (*awsiya*), God Almighty placed them on the earth in place of the prophets, since God removed the prophets, the seal of whom was Muhammad, may God's prayers and peace be upon him and his family."<sup>131</sup>

There is another view that sees the *abdal* as a group of the best imams. This is based on the transmission of Muhammad Baqir Al-Majlisi (d. 1111/1699) in his collection *Bihar al-Anwar*. Among the prayers attributed to the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in the middle of Rajab is one in which he says: "God's prayers be upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad... God's prayers be upon the legates (*awsiya*) and the happy, the martyrs, the imams of the true path, God's prayers be upon the *abdal* and the *awtad*, the *suyyah* (itinerant dervishes) and the '*abbad* (servants of God), the devoted and the abstemious, the serious and hardworking people"<sup>132</sup>

However, most Shi'i interpretations link this term to the Mahdi and the events of the end times. For example, Shaykh al-Ta'ifah Abu Ja'far Muhammad ibn al-Hassan al-Tusi (d. 460/1067) stated that the *abdal* are a limited group of the Mahdi's soldiers, "they pledge alle-

<sup>131</sup> *Al-Ihtijaj*, Manshurat al-Sharif al-Radiyy, Qom, 1380/1960, Vol. 2, p. 231

<sup>132</sup> *Bihar al-Anwar*, Dar Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 27, p. 48

giance to the appearing one—the Mahdi. Between Rukn and Maqam are three hundred and some, among them many people of Badr, and the *nujaba'* from Egypt, the *abdal* from al-Sham, and the *akhyar* (excellent ones) from Iraq....”<sup>133</sup>

Al-Majlisi mentions that after the Mahdi returns and meets his enemies on the battlefield, a group of his soldiers will emerge from his army and join his enemies, while a group of the enemy’s army will come out and join the ranks of the Mahdi’s soldiers. Those are the *abdal*, and this day is called the day of the *abdal*.<sup>134</sup> There is also another view proposed by the contemporary Shi’i scholar cleric ‘Ali al-Kourani, based on one of the narratives attributed to Ja’far al-Sadiq, in which he mentions that the *abdal* are “thirty believers that the Mahdi will meet in his absence. Every time one of them dies, God replaces them with another, and so they are called the *abdal*.”<sup>135</sup>

Contrary to the Sunni and Shi’i paradigms, where hadith with a political leaning spread, the Ibadi intellectual paradigm—considered to be one of the intellectual paradigms originating from the Khawarij sect—paid little attention to that type of hadith and in most cases tended to doubt, marginalize and downplay them.

Thus, hadith that mentioned the term *abdal* were not authenticated by Ibadis, and Ibadi scholars did not research their number, status, or features like the Sunnis and the Shi’a. However, the term entered the Ibadi sphere through the term “*al-suluk*,” which is a spiritual current equivalent to Sufism among the Ibadis. The Ibadis recognized the existence of the *aqtab*, *awtad*, and *abdal*, and understood them to be levels of knowledge. They did not ascribe to them any of the metaphysical characteristics that Sufi sayings did. For example, Ibadi historian Badr al-Din al-Shamakhi mentions in his book *al-Siyar* that some scholars were given the title the seven *abdal* in the Wadi

<sup>133</sup> [*Kitab*] *al-Ghayba*, critical edition by Shaykh ‘Abad Allah al-Tehrani, Shaykh ‘Ali Ahmad Nasih, Mu’assasat al-Ma’arif al-Islamiyya, Qom, 1411/1990, Vol. 1, p. 497

<sup>134</sup> *Bihar al-anwar*, Vol. 27, p.48

<sup>135</sup> Article titled “Man Hum al-Abdal wa Kam ‘Adaduhum?” accessed on 25/2/2020, <https://www.islam4u.com/ar/shobahat/> من-هم-الابدال-وكم-عدددهم؟

Righ area of Algeria in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AH. These include ‘Abd al-Allah ibn Ya‘qub ibn Harun al-Waghlani, who was described by al-Shamakhi as follows: “He was given knowledge while young, and was a devout scholar, considered one of the seven *abdal*...”<sup>136</sup> and Mu‘adh ibn Abi ‘Ali, who described him as “one of the seven *abdal* mentioned in Wadi Righ... He was a virtuous, ascetic, pure-hearted, praiseworthy man...”<sup>137</sup>

### Conclusion and findings

This paper has drawn a number of important conclusions, namely:

- The Sufi meaning of the term *abdal* has passed through several successive stages, in which the meanings of the term, the concepts it was based on, and its interaction with the prevailing collective Sufi imaginary differed.
- In the early stage of Sufism, the term *abdal* was used routinely, without specification or distinction.
- The Sufi hierarchy established by Ibn ‘Arabi in *al-Futuhāt* was largely similar to the hierarchy of the Isma‘ili *da‘wa* several centuries prior.
- Despite the clear differences in identifying the number of the *abdal*, most Sufi narratives state that they are seven men or forty men, and it is likely that the emphasis on the two numbers was due to the influence of the ancient mythological and cultural contexts of the ancient Near East.
- When considering the evolution of the term *abdal* and its manifestations at the political and social levels in the countries of Islam, it is important not to overlook the appearance of a Sufi order

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<sup>136</sup> See translation of “‘Abd Allah ibn Ya‘qub ibn Harun al-Waghlani”, accessed on 25/2/2020, on the website of the Taddart Markaz al-Dirasat al-Ibadiyya, <http://www.taddart.org/?m=201009&paged=60>

<sup>137</sup> Ibid

known as the order of the *abdal* in Anatolia in the 8th century AH (13th century AD), with the emergence of the Ottoman Empire.

- Among the miracles generally attributed by Sufis to the *abdal* in contemporary times is that of protecting and blessing countries and the safety of their people. It seems these beliefs in particular have increased in recent years with the escalating pace of the civil war and upheavals in Syria, which is seen as the homeland and stronghold of the *abdal*.

- Despite the prevalence of hadith and traditions mentioning the *abdal*, many Sunni scholars have rejected the authenticity of such hadith. Among the most well-known of these scholars are Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyya from the earlier period, and Muhammad Rashid Rida and Mahmud Abu Rayya more recently.

- The concept of the *abdal* entered Shi'i culture at a relatively later stage, and the majority of Shi'i interpretations link this term with the events of the end times.

- Contrary to the Sunni and Shi'i paradigm, the Ibadi paradigm did not place great importance on the hadith and traditions on the *abdal* and tended to question or marginalize them in most cases.

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SECOND CHAPTER

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## Return to Sufism: Various Patterns



# THE SEARCH FOR INNER PEACE: The Return to Sufism and Shifts in Religiosity in Syria

*Abdul Rahman al-Hajj*

## Introduction

Historically, Syria is the final resting place of great Sufis such as al-Shaykh al-Akbar Ibn 'Arabi (d. 638/1240), Shaykh al-Ishraq Abu al-Futuh al-Suhrawardi (d. 586/1191), 'Immad al-Din al-Nasimi (d. 796/1417), Imam al-Nawawi (d. 676/1277), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751/1350), and Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 180/801), founder of the school of divine love, whose grave is famous in the al-Qaimariyya region of the Old City of Damascus. Syria was visited by great Sufis such as Jalal al-Din Rumi, author of the *Mathnawi*, who met Ibn 'Arabi and presented him with some of his works in Arabic. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) also lived there, in isolation in the Umayyad Mosque (where there now exists what is known as the Ghazali *zawiya* (corner)), where he composed his famous book *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*.

The Sunni character of Sufism in Syria can be seen through its intersection with the three schools of Sunni jurisprudence (Hanafi, Shafi'i, and Hanbali) prevalent in the country. Syria represents the largest part of the Levant, and in order to understand how Sufism took hold in Syria, the role Sufism has played in the life of the communities of this region, and the results today, after the earthquake of the Arab Spring, a comparison based on the perspective of power relationships is insufficient. This paper looks at the forms and fate of Sufism in Syria after the revolution and asks whether Sufism is witnessing a return or new awakening.

## 1. Two Sufisms

'Abboud al-'Askari's book *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf fi Suriyya* (2006)<sup>138</sup> and Itzchak Weismann's book *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (2000)<sup>139</sup> are nearly the only two books about the history of Sufism in Syria in the modern period. While al-'Askari tends toward a traditional narrative and descriptive approach, providing information with little analysis or logic of historical research, Weismann presents a historical analysis based on a methodology drawn from political sociology and anthropology through which he attempts to observe deep-rooted cultural and social factors as well as power relations in the emergence and course of the reform movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. This attempt is quite close to David Commins' study *Islamic Reform: Politics, and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (1990),<sup>140</sup> in which the author presents a thesis on the social backgrounds of Levantine reformers and their relationship to political power from the perspective of political sociology. In both of these last works, power relations figure prominently as the basis of the analysis, which is frequently the goal of such analysis.

### a. *An urban Sufism and a rural Sufism*

A look at the sociodemographic map of Syria aids in observing different characteristics of Sufism based on the environment in which it is found. This is related to the role of Sufism and its interplay with society. Two forms of Sufism can be clearly observed: urban Sufism and rural Sufism. While urban populations are inclined toward a Sufism that meets the spiritual needs of the population and plays a compensatory role to the excesses of the material world, the Sufism of rural populations (especially the neglected countryside and the

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<sup>138</sup> Al-'Askari, 'Abboud 'Abdullah. *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf fi Suriyya: al-Nasha wa-l-Tatawur* (Damascus: Dar Namir, 2006)

<sup>139</sup> Weismann, Itzchak. *Taste of Modernity: Sufism, Salafiyya, and Arabism in Late Ottoman Damascus* (Leiden: Brill, 2001)

<sup>140</sup> Commins, David Dean. *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). Arabic translation by 'Abd al-Majid al-Radi, 1999.

Badia (desert region)) tends to have a fantastical character with a parallel tendency toward magic. Urban Sufism emphasizes moderation and generally does not contain the superstition and performative inclination to the supernatural (miracles) found in rural areas. Urban Sufism also does not in general accept psychic lore and distances itself from the supernatural, leaning instead toward working to improve the self and reflect this in social practices.<sup>141</sup>

Rural Sufism on the other hand tends to have a tribal disposition and the structure of a religious fiefdom. Most leaders of Sufi orders become large landowners in a narrative resembling that of seers in primitive societies, by moving from religious leadership to social leadership on religious grounds.<sup>142</sup> Leaders of Sufi orders in cities and urban centers tend toward real ascetic practices, and this is their strength; while their followers (urban merchants often being a large portion of them) take it upon themselves to look after their welfare and keep them from being in need if they have no independent source of support, which is usually the case. Shaykhs of orders in urban centers play a dual role: they are “social reformers” and “spiritual educators” at the same time. In rural areas, the role of shaykhs of Sufi orders expands to one similar to that of “tribal shaykh,” but it is a role that transcends tribe, family, and clan.

*b. Popular Sufism and Sufi orders*

Sufi thought is recognized as a traditional pillar of Syrian culture that considerably and to various depths governs religious thinking. The rise of Salafism at the beginning of the century following the impact of the Wahhabi movement in the Arabian Peninsula, did not change this and Salafism in Syria remained an elite movement li-

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<sup>141</sup> On Sufism among the fellahin in Syria see: Batatu, Hanna. *Falahu Suriyya: Abna' Wujaha'ihim al-Rifiyyin al-Aqal Sha'nan wa Siyasatihim*, translated by 'Abdullah Fadil and Ra'id al-Naqshbandi (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015), p. 204

<sup>142</sup> On the transformation of Sufis in the countryside to landowners and feudalists, see: Batatu, Hanna. *Falahu Suriyya*, p. 209.

mitted to specific persons.<sup>143</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, Salafism did not move beyond the large cities or even the larger urban centers in Syria, and resembled a minority orientation on the fringes of society that lacked popular acceptance.

There is a vast difference between the prevalence of Sufi culture among Syrians and the many followers of Sufi orders.<sup>144</sup> The observation that Sufism is the general culture of Syrians across their various affiliations is not a difficult one to make, and in order for this study to have meaning a distinction must be made between Sufi orders and the popular Sufism that represents a Sufi culture more than an organized Sufi religion. The dynamics of the spread and change in popular Sufism are largely distinct from the changes that impacted Sufi orders and their spread. In Sufi orders, the structure of the group and its relation to society, power, and the centers of influence play a main role and are more vulnerable to external factors. The traditional pyramid of Sufi orders (the *shaykh-murid* hierarchy) is fragile, subject to both breakdown and exploitation, while the dynamics of popular Sufism are impacted by the pressures of life and its changing forms and the detours posed by existential questions, especially in an unstable region like the Middle East. At the ideological level, Sufi orders appear to be rigid and unchangeable, but at the structural level they are subject to rapid change based on circumstances and conditions. They are two types of Sufism with two different sets of dynamics.

Annemarie Schimmel was a scholar who specialized in Islamic mysticism who used the expression “popular Sufism” early in her research on cultural mysticism in Turkey.<sup>145</sup> This concept has not been given its due in scholarly research, and deserves to open a new door

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<sup>143</sup> Commins, David. *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria* translated into Arabic by Majid al-Radi (Damascus: Dar al-Mada, 1999), p. 206.

<sup>144</sup> On Sufi Orders in Syria and their spread see: al-‘Askari, ‘Abboud ‘Abdulla. *Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi Suriyya: Tasawurat wa Mafhumat* (Damascus: Dar Namir, 2006)

<sup>145</sup> See: Schimmel, Annemarie. *Al-Ab‘ad al-sufiyya fi-l-‘Islam wa tarikh al-tasawwuf*, translated by Muhammad ‘Isma‘il al-Sayyid, (Baghdad: Manshurat al-Jamal, 2006), p. 371-390

to much research on Islamic mysticism, if it is approached using new research methodology and tools.

## 2. Sufi organizations: gentlemen sheikhs

The modernity that seeped into this region imposed new forms previously unexplored by Sufism. Organizations and movements with modern forms and “semi-organized” Sufi content emerged. At the beginning of the last century, Sufi *jama'iyat* (sing. *jama'iya*, associations) appeared that sometimes acted as political parties, as if they were a political arm of Sufi orders. These associations played a key role in the political struggle until the end of the liberal age in Syria, when the union with Egypt was declared.

The emergence of a sociopolitical struggle over the national state and its identity after the breakup of the caliphate spurred the organization of associations and the rise of Sufism as a political force with broad social support, especially as the Union and Progress Committee had good relations with reformist Salafist movement and its organizations.<sup>146</sup> Sufis and the traditional ‘ulama’ founded al-Jama’iyya al-Gharra’ (the Honorable Association) in Damascus in 1924. The founders, Sufi Shaykh ‘Ali al-Daqr and Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Tabaa’, belonged to the Tijaniyya order<sup>147</sup> and were students of Shaykh Badr al-Din al-Hasani (d. 1934), a major figure of Sufism and the ‘ulama’ in Damascus. This association appeared to have a broad popular base and strong political influence, to the degree that the Mandate forces called them the “party of Syria.”<sup>148</sup>

Jama’iyya al-Hadaya al-Islamiyya (Hadaya Islamic Association) was founded in 1930 in Damascus headed by Shaykh Abu al-Khayr al-Midani (d. 1961) (who later headed Jama’iyya al-‘Ulama’). Jama’iyya al-‘Ulama’ (‘Ulama Association) was established in 1937 by Shaykh Kamil al-Qassab (d. 1953), and Jama’iyya al-Tawjih al-Islami (Islamic Guidance Association) was established in the 1940s by

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<sup>146</sup> Commins, David. *Islamic Reform*, p. 242

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, p. 235

<sup>148</sup> Riesner, Johannes. *Al-Harakat al-Islamiyya fi Suriyya: min al-Arba’ayniyat wa hatta Nahayat ‘Ahd al-Shishkali* (Beirut: Riad al-Rayyis, 2005), p. 119



Shaykh Hasan Habanka al-Maydani (d. 1978). There were several other associations in Damascus.

In Aleppo, *Jama'iyya al-Birr wa-l-'Akhlaq* (Righteousness and Morality Association) was established in 1946 and headed by Shaykh Muhammad al-Hakim (d. 1980) a descendant of Naqshbandya that headed Rabita 'Ulama' Halab (League of Aleppo 'Ulama'), established in 1946. In Hama, the association al-Hidaya al-Islamiyya (Islamic Guidance) was established in 1931 as a branch of the Damascus association, that brought together Sufis including Sufi orders (Melevi, Rifa'i, and Qadiriyya) in Hama, under the leadership of Shaykh Mahmud al-Shaqfa.<sup>149</sup> There are many other examples of Sufi-oriented associations in the various large cities. This is a phenomenon that emerged in urban centers in general, where there continued to be an absence of Sufi orders.

These organizational forms later evolved, and the *jama'at* (sing *jama'a*, close religious groups) appeared. These entities resemble Christian brotherhoods, without strong organizational features but possessing some type of membership system.<sup>150</sup> For the Sufi *jama'at*, Sufi orders represent a fundamental pillar of the founding ideology of these groups. For example, the group "al-Qubaysiat" (which does not use an organizational name like *jama'a*), established by Munira al-Qubaysi (b. 1933), is a women's revivalist group with al-Naqshbandi Sufism as its foundation. This group is closer to a movement in the organizational sense,<sup>151</sup> and is linked to Shaykh Ahmad Kaftaro (a Naqshbandi), founder of what is popularly known as the Abu al-Nur group or al-Kaftariyya. This new organizational form is in fact just an updated version of organized Sufism, but it is a version with a school-like character that lacks a number of the traits of traditional Sufi orders, including the system of succession.

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<sup>149</sup> Weisman, "The Politics of Popular Religion", p. 49

<sup>150</sup> On the concept of the religious *jama'a*, see: Al-Haj, 'Abdulrahman. *Al-Dawla wa-l-Jama'a: al-Tattalu'at al-Siyasiyya li-l-Jama'at al-Diniyya fi Suriyya: 2000-2011* (London: Markaz al-Tawasul wa-l-Abhath al-Istratijiyya, 2011), p. 8

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16

### 3. A necessary evil: Sufi involvement in politics

Sufism, especially organized Sufism, established a strong relationship with the governing apparatus. This is due to the lure of authority that offers a structure containing many followers and broad popular influence drawn from the compatibility of the general Sufi religious discourse with local culture. Feelings of power tempt its use, and religious leaders will struggle with conflicting feelings over power and their sense of social responsibility and religious convictions based on asceticism and detachment from the mortal world and materialism. Meanwhile, for a politician this is an opportunity to strengthen their own influence while stripping religious leaders of their political influence. They do this by subordinating and tempting them with the support of their government, while simultaneously solidifying the religious “legitimacy” of that government, or at least mitigating potential religiously-based opposition to it.

The Ottomans wanted to restructure Sufi orders within a centralized hierarchical structure and integrate it into the administrative structures of the sultanate. However, this process was not fully successful, and many Sufi *zawaya* (sing. *zawiya*, lodges) remained at a distance from the hegemony of the grand shaykh’s authority. Therefore, these *zawaya* operated as social institutions independent of the state’s authority.<sup>152</sup> Since independence, successive national governments have tried to establish religious administrative structures as a part of the state’s centralized policies to control the religious sphere. Under president Husni al-Za’im, a law was enacted nationalizing family endowments. Nationalization policies led to the erosion of the economic independence of all religious institutions in favor of state control, and that led religious leaders and Sufis in particular to search for other independent resources in order to survive.

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<sup>152</sup> See: Benito, Paulo. “Alaqaṭ Harija: al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Dawla fi Suriyya,” translated by Hamza Yasin, Ma’had al-‘Alim li-l-Dirasat, 2 November 2016. Can be viewed at: <http://alaalam.org/ar/translations-ar/item/424-615021116>. Accessed on 9/6/2020.

The Syrian Baath party displayed a notable lack of interest in developing religious bureaucracy. The Baathists did not seek to integrate the ‘ulama’ into the state apparatus. Instead, they intentionally excluded them, and religious leaders enjoyed relative economic and institutional independence. This was to form a key point of transition in the modern history of shaykhs in Syria, because it ended the existence of the revered ‘ulama’ with official recognition and feelings of responsibility toward the state, as is the case with the senior ‘ulama’ of al-Azhar in Egypt and the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia. This would have two important consequences. First, it made reestablishing a representative body of senior Muslim ‘ulama’ in the country one of the main aspirations of the Syrian religious elite. Second, the structure of the ‘ulama’ was completely different from that in other countries, as there was no strong religious institution allied with the government, meaning there was no center for the ‘ulama’, and there were no ‘ulama’ in the perimeter either, just religious factions with varying degrees of closeness to the state.<sup>153</sup>

There is another trait “of the conduct of Syrian political ‘ulama’, namely their combination of strategic rigidity and tactical flexibility. The strategic rigidity can be understood as a result of their being men of faith, making it difficult for them to compromise on the religious principles they are supposed to be defending. Their tactical flexibility is a result of their ability to enter the political field when there is a suitable context, and of the ease with which they can retreat to their original social identity as religious leaders when circumstances change, for example, with the appearance of an authoritarian regime.”<sup>154</sup> This quality applies to Sufi shaykhs more than it does to others.

#### 4. At a crossroads: Sufism on the eve of the revolution

Eight main orders represent organized Sufism in Syria: Shadhili, Naqshbandi, Rifa’i, Khalwati, Mevlevi, Qadiriyya, Sa’adiyya, and

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<sup>153</sup> Pierret, Thomas. *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p.17, 19

<sup>154</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, p. 209

Ahmadiyya.<sup>155</sup> Three orders, Shadhili, Naqshbandi, and Rifa'i, have the most followers of Sufi orders in Syria.<sup>156</sup> However, it is easy to see that the large urban centers are dominated by two orders: Naqshbandi and Shadhili, while the Rifa'i order is dominant in the Badia and outer regions.<sup>157</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, amid an internal political struggle, the state took control of the endowments of Sufi orders and religious institutions, which spurred on the organizational form of Sufism. This indicates that the spread of these orders is not a response to the challenge of modernization alone, but a confrontation with what was viewed as a challenge to the identity of the Islamic community itself. This increased with the appearance of the new extreme leftist Baath reform government that would be met with the spread of religious knowledge and efforts to effect a popular religious revival.<sup>158</sup> While the Shadhili and Rifa'i orders worked in the same traditional manner and within the same traditional structures (*shaykh-murid*) without any notable change, Naqshbandi shaykhs had a different response, and were able to create distinctive *jama'at* with broad influence in Damascus and Aleppo in particular.

All these *jama'at* were founded by shaykhs who belonged primarily to the Naqshbandi order. This is largely because Naqshbandi shaykhs are generally from the 'ulama' class and are not merely ascetics and followers. It is also due to the experience they acquired during the association phase and in the political struggle with the modernizing national elite of the time, as these Naqshbandi shaykhs

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<sup>155</sup> On Sufi orders in Syria, see: al-'Askari, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf*, p. 91, p. 137, p. 155

<sup>156</sup> Thomas Pierret points out that Syrian 'ulama' in the second half of the twentieth century belonged to either the Shadhili or Naqshbandi orders. Pierret, Thomas. "Sunni Clergy Politics in the Cities of Ba'thi Syria", various authors, *Demystifying Syria*, edited by Fred H. Lawson, translated by Fatin Shams, (Istanbul: Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 2018) p. 147

<sup>157</sup> On the spread of the Rifa'i order in the countryside and the social origins of its shaykhs, see: Batatu, Hanna. *Falahu Suriyya*, p. 206

<sup>158</sup> Salih Jadid. *Al-Za'im al-Suri al-Samit*, Aljazeera.net, 27/2/2006, at: <https://bit.ly/37hp67n>

were the ones who led the confrontation with a trend regarded as foreign and Westernizing.

This development was to have great impact. The organizational models on which the groups and institutions were established (institutes and schools) imposed a relationship with the existing authorities, because the legal status of the institutions owned by these groups was under state authority. With the Baath coup and then the one-man state under Assad, the relationship became more complicated. Legal status was not enough: loyalty to the regime had become a requirement. Here the *jama'at* had two choices: establish a relationship with the regime, either to the least degree possible, known under the Baath phrase “positive neutrality,” or full involvement in the regime’s agenda in exchange for being offered the opportunity to operate. Or, they could refuse to show loyalty, whether by trying to demonstrate negative neutrality or open opposition.

Out of seven *jama'at*, three adopted an explicit position toward the Baath regime and then Assad. These are Jama'at al-Midan and Jama'at Abi Dhur in Aleppo and Jama'at Zayd in Damascus. When the violent clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad regime broke out at the end of the 1970s, these groups got involved in the struggle to various degrees, from full involvement (Jama'at Abi Dhur) and partial involvement (Jama'at Zayd and Jama'at al-Midan). Jama'at Kaftaru joined the regime’s discourse and agenda after its leader was made the grand mufti of the republic under the Baath; he was overthrown by his successors on the basis of loyalty. Other religious groups remained distant from the regime and its push-pull relations. One exception is the Jama'at al-Fath (al-Farfur), which was seeking a foothold in state institutions and whose sheikhs demonstrated ambitions similar to the Kaftariyya. One of its prominent shaykhs, 'Abd al-Fattah al-Bazam was made mufti of Damascus in 1993, inaugurating a new era for the group.

Naturally the *jama'at* that were involved in the struggle against the Assad regime all suffered later. Hundreds of members of the Jama'a Abu Durr were executed in the prisons and its shaykhs were exiled (Shaykh Muhammad Rawwas Qal'aji, Shaykh Nasih 'Ulwan,

Shaykh Muhammad al-Sabuni). Numerous members of Jama'at Zayd also met a similar fate and its most prominent shaykhs were exiled (Sariyya al-Rifa'i, 'Abd al-Karim al-Rifa'i, Muhammad 'Awad).<sup>159</sup> This legacy would later have deep impact.

What became of the Shadhili and Rifa'i orders? Some of their shaykhs joined the emerging armed struggle with Assad at the end of the 1980s, and many of their followers joined al-Tal'ia al-Muqatila (the Fighting Vanguard) and the Muslim Brotherhood. The shaykhs of these orders—some of whom were members of the Muslim Brotherhood—played a significant role in urging their members to join the confrontation “as they saw it as a threat to Muslim society.”<sup>160</sup> In the midst of this struggle, the regime was expected to target the shaykhs.<sup>161</sup>

In the countryside, where the Rifa'i order spread, there was an increasing divide between the way of life in urban centers and the outer regions, especially eastern Syria and the Badia, where poverty and the harshness of daily life persisted. One of the most striking indications of this is the heavy migration to urban centers, especially during the major drought between 2006 and 2008, when hundreds of thousands migrated from the al-Jazira region (Upper Mesopotamia) to large cities, especially Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs,<sup>162</sup> even though eastern Syria and the Badia region contain most of the country's economic resources, especially oil. In light of this injustice, there is no doubt that the population was torn between magical and irrational thinking to confront the hardships of life and disaffected radical thinking that seeks to resist and achieve justice through force, something that could be found in rigid ideologies like Salafism and Marxism.

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<sup>159</sup> Compare with: Pierret, “Sunni Clergy Policies,” p. 151

<sup>160</sup> Benito, Paulo. “Alaqt Harija”

<sup>161</sup> See previous reference as well as: Sa'ad al-Din, 'Adnan. *Mudhakarāt wa Dhikriyat: Sanawat al-Majazir al-Mur'iba min 'Am 1977 hatta 'Am 1983* (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2010), p. 155-159

<sup>162</sup> On the drought see: Barut, Jamal. *al-'Aqad al-Akhir fi Tarikh Suriyya: Jadaliya al-Jumud wa-l-Islah* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012), p.126

The orders in the outer regions adjusted to this lifestyle and did not witness deep organizational changes like those seen in the centers. Instead they retained their traditional structure, which was more hierarchical and included the order's mysterious and supernatural rituals.<sup>163</sup> They immersed themselves in the irrational and magical, and formed a refuge for the poor, simple, and illiterate. Poverty as a way of detaching from the world is a suitable model, respected as an ideal in these environments. While generally looked down on in urban environments, it is compatible with the same level of values, such as conviction, contentment, modesty, trust in God, patience during adversity, afflictions, misfortunes, and suffering, given the state of isolation in which the fellahin and people of the Badia live. Even the shaykhs of these orders are from a rural background and have a modest education, which strengthens their ability to communicate and connect.<sup>164</sup>

However, to the extent that Sufism constituted both a tool for exercising control and providing solace to populations far from urban modernization in bearing the burdens and hardness of life, it had another side. In some cases, it constituted a force for protest and rebellion that could not be underestimated. For example, the Rifa'i order was one of the most important religious forces supporting the Syrian revolution against the French occupation up until its expulsion, especially in northern Syria.<sup>165</sup>

The Shadhili orders retained their traditional relative centrality, where the shaykh of the order and his successors are known and represent the order's authority (in fact the order had two shaykhs: Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghuri (d. 2004) in Damascus and Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir 'Issa in Aleppo (d. 1991), who engaged in tacit competition with each other). However, both the Rifa'i and the

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<sup>163</sup> On the spread of the supernatural and miracles in the Rifa'i and Qadiriyya order that predominate the countryside and Badia in Syria see: al-'Abadala, 'Abd al-Jaili 'Ali. "al-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi bilad al-Sham wa Anmat al-Tadayun al-Shababiyya" in various authors. *Al-Islam al-Na'im: al-Tasawwuf fi Bilad al-Sham* (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Center, 2013), p. 182

<sup>164</sup> Batatu, Hanna. *Falahu Suriyya*, p. 208-209

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid*, p. 213

Naqshbandi orders<sup>166</sup> lacked this centrality, and each shaykh represented the authority of the order themselves personally.

This state of Sufi orders in Syria is not the full picture. Popular Sufism had started to decline and retreat. The technological revolution, the increasing level and spread of education, the appearance of alternative methods of education such as satellite channels and the internet, the blockage of horizons for political participation and loss of hope in any change with significant social and economic transformations, and the migration of the countryside to the large cities led to a change in people's concerns, understandings, behavior, perceptions, and even their values.

There was notable economic growth in the ten years before the revolution started. Such growth was generated by an authoritarian economic liberalization policy monopolized by what is known as "the class of young wolves"<sup>167</sup> (economists within the narrow circle of the Assad family), a prime example of whom is Rami Makhlof. This dysfunctional growth, where the cities reaped millions of fruit and the countryside its thorns, led to proliferating signs of modernity, increasing unemployment, and a deepening divide in the development of the countryside and the city, which put pressure on the people of the outer regions and spurred their aspirations to join the cities.<sup>168</sup>

Alongside this, unstable policies toward religious groups and currents in general were put in place. Early on after coming to power, Bashar Assad sought legitimacy through Jama'at Zayd, the most influential group in Damascus. Assad granted them leadership (formerly held by the mufti) of one of the largest new mosques in Damascus, allowing them to engage in their activities within limits that were not harmful to the regime. Assad himself even prayed in this mosque on a

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<sup>166</sup> On the decentralization of the Naqshbandi order see: al-Murshid, 'Abbas. "al-Jughrafiya al-Mutadayina.al-Imtidad wa-l-Isti'ab lada Mutasawifa al-Sham" in various authors. *Al-Islam al-Na'im: al-Tasawwuf fi Bilad al-Sham* (Dubai: Al-Mesbar Center, 2013), p. 412

<sup>167</sup> Bishara, Azmi. *Suriyya Darb al-Alalam nahw al-Huriyya: Muhawala fi al-Tarikh al-Rahin* (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2013), p. 305

<sup>168</sup> Barut, Jamal. *al-'Aqad al-Akhir*, p. 136



religious holiday with the aim of emphasizing his closeness to the people of Damascus. However, dealings soon changed, shifting from flattery and an emphasis on closeness to society, to bolster the political legitimacy of a man coming to rule through succession, to security-related rigidity after the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, which Assad used as an opportunity to impose the “legitimacy of force.”

These unstable and contradictory policies would lead to increasing anger toward government authorities and form an important element in mobilization against the regime later.<sup>169</sup> They would also lead to a clear shift in popular Sufism, easily seen in the changing interests of the youth and their lifestyle. By early 2010 there was widespread dissatisfaction with government policies toward the ‘ulama’ and senior shaykhs.<sup>170</sup>

## 5. Impossible neutrality

The Syrian revolution broke out on 15 March 2011 and took hold on the 18<sup>th</sup> with the events in Daraa. In order to understand the repercussions of an event like this and predict its impact on Sufi religious structures and popular religion, popular Sufism in particular, it is necessary to understand the type of relations between the authorities and society that formed before 2011 and those that took shape after it.

The relationship based on the model of an alliance of necessity, arising from a balance in which the regime was given stability in exchange for allowing the *jama’at* to continue, did not last long. The revolution forced the regime, which chose to stay in power by force no matter the human cost, to adopt a new formula. There was to be no distance from the regime: the choice was with or against. Naked force was used to compel the shaykhs and ‘ulama’, in particular the shaykhs of orders and leaders of *jama’at*, to show loyalty and engage in the anti-revolutionary discourse. There was no space for neutrali-

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<sup>169</sup> Al-Haj, ‘Abdulrahman. *Al-Dawla wa-l-Jama’a*, p. 62

<sup>170</sup> Pierret, *Religion and State*, p. 215

ty. This had three unavoidable results. First, religion was transformed into a tool in the revolutionary struggle. Second, it caused a schism in the 'ulama' class and *jama'at*. Third, the religious beliefs of a broad sector of society was dealt a violent shock that would change the forms of popular religion that constitute its actual depth.

The only place not subject to the control of a state agency where Syrians were not forbidden from holding a public gathering or communicating directly with the public was the Friday prayer at the mosques. The mosque was the only option available for Syrians to form the demonstrations, demonstrations in which everyone participated without distinction. This explains the presence of Christians and other religious minorities at the mosques, to join the protests. Everyone understood that the regime had barred all public spaces, yet it could not control this space.

There were two key outcomes to the fact that protests left from the mosques. First, it deepened the shaykhs' predicament: with or against the revolution. Second, it raised questions in the public domain about religion's relationship to tyranny as never before. This was certain to have consequences and would lead broad sectors of Syrian youth to take an unprecedented interest in religion. It would also be the beginning of the self-reflection that would form the basis of the religious shifts that followed.

Part of the regime's pressure on the shaykhs to be either against the revolution or against the regime was because the protests formed in the mosques, which itself was mainly due to pressure from the protestors. A second and more important part of this pressure is its use of religion in its struggle with society and its confrontation with a popular revolution, due to its belief that religion is a crucial factor in Syrians' lives. However, taking a position on the revolution meant taking a position on the people's will for liberation, and this became a position on religious leaders and religion itself, as religion is supposed to side with oppressed peoples and not their oppressors. In other words, a position on the revolution was a measure of the correct religious position.

At a time in which Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id al-Bouti, considered part of the official religious system, decisively and with increasing intensity joined the regime's discourse against the revolution, while the shaykhs of Jama'at Zayd, Osama and Sariya al-Rifa'i, harshly criticized the conduct of the regime very early on. Their discourse remained hesitant, trying to remain impartial, until they felt that matters had become unbearable. As the violence escalated, the deaths increased, and the revolution spread throughout the country, they decisively declared their alignment with the revolution.<sup>171</sup>

Shaykh Muhammad Abu al-Huda al-Yaqoubi, descendant of a family that traces their origins to al-Ashraf and a follower of the al-Shadhli-al-Idrisiyya order,<sup>172</sup> criticized the detention and killing of peaceful protestors (in the Friday sermon on 5 May 2011) in the al-Hassan Mosque in the upscale neighborhood of Abu Rummaneh in Damascus. He dismissed the regime's claim that "the revolution is a foreign conspiracy" and went so far as to hold *Salat al-Gha'ib* (absentee funeral prayer) for the victims.<sup>173</sup> This was the boldest position taken by a shaykh in confronting the regime's anti-revolutionary policies at that time, and just months later, on 27 February 2012, the shaykh issued a fatwa calling for jihad to overthrow the Assad regime.<sup>174</sup>

Such events recurred in a similar manner with others. This includes the shaykh of the Damascus branch of the Shadhili order in Aleppo, Abu al-Huda al-Hussayni, who later joined the revolution, Shaykh Jalil Ibrahim Saqini, official mufti of Aleppo, Shaykh Anas 'Ay-

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<sup>171</sup> Al-Khatib, Mu'ataz. "al-Tanafus 'ala al-Din wa-l-Siyasa fi Suriyya," Aljazeera.net, 5/8/2014. Available at: <https://bit.ly/34eqFkt> Accessed on 11/6/2020

<sup>172</sup> On Abu al-Huda al-Yaqoubi's biography, see his official page on Facebook. Available at [https://www.facebook.com/pg/ShaykhMuhammadAbulhudaAlYaqoubi/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/ShaykhMuhammadAbulhudaAlYaqoubi/about/?ref=page_internal) Accessed on 11/6/2020

<sup>173</sup> "Ahdath Suriyya: al-Da' wa-l-Dawa'," Shaykh al-Yaqoubi, Sacred Knowledge channel on YouTube. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o7Ozu1xDlgMA> Accessed on 11/6/2020

<sup>174</sup> See the fatwa on Shaykh al-Yaqoubi's official Facebook page. Available at: <https://facebook.com/ShaykhMuhammadAbulhudaAlYaqoubi/posts/281516185312471> Accessed on 12/6/2020.

rut who represents the al-Shadhli order in Baniyas, the blind Shaykh of Daraa, Ahmad al-Sayasna, who played an important role in the first Darra events, Shaykh 'Adnan al-Saqa and Shaykh As'ad Kahil in Homs, and many others.

The schism appeared extreme, inevitable. All former allies of the regime in Sufi *jama'at* would merge into its discourse. This was a predictable choice unfamiliar to the two *jama'at*'s previous relationship with the regime. What was new was the position of the Qubaysiat group. This group had consistently tried to distance itself from the regime, however, during the revolution some of the group's leadership showed the full engagement of the group's leadership in the regime's agenda and discourse. It was later rewarded with positions in regime institutions.

Many factors pushed the Qubaysiat to follow this course. On one hand, the Qubaysiat had penetrated the upper class in Damascus, a class with a strong relationship to the state in order to protect its own interests. This had a greater impact when a portion of the leadership of the second rank was made up of children of officials and businessmen allied with the regime. Certainly, in such crises, every possible connection will be used to force them into an absolute alliance with the Assad regime. However this new alignment with the Assad regime led to division among the group's followers and a large portion of them left the *jama'a*.<sup>175</sup>

But what happened with the Sufi orders?

The orders, which are less cohesive and organized than *jama'at*, had a similar outcome. They did exactly the same thing they did in the 1980s. Many shaykhs of orders moved from a hesitant discourse to joining the revolution and confronting the regime, as indi-

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<sup>175</sup> On the *jama'a* and its changing relationship to the regime see: Al-Haj, 'Abdulrahman. *Al-Dawla wa-l-Jama'a*, p. 36 and 'Ammadi, 'Amru. "Almaniyya Tanthimiyya: al-Harakat al-Islamiyya al-Damashqiyya wa-l-Thawra al-Suriyya", translated by Hamza 'Amir, Ma'had al-'Alim li-l-Dirasat, 31 March 2018. Available at: <http://alaalam.org/ar/translations-ar/item/678-712310318>  
Accessed on 12/6/2020

cated to above. As the revolution became armed, the followers of these jama'at and orders formed a number of military brigades and battalions, such as Ansar Brigade (Liwa' al-Ansar) and Al-Safwa Battalions (Katibat al-Safwa), most of which united under the Levant Front (Jabhat al-Shamiyya) in Aleppo and still exist today. Others include Al-Tawhid Brigade (Liwa' al-Tawhid) that was led by Shaykh Abdul Qader Saleh in the northern Aleppo countryside, known for its Sufi leanings; the Rifa'i battalions in the al-Hajar al-Aswad area outside Damascus; al-Rahman Legion (Faylaq al-Rahman) in Eastern Ghouta that joined a group of factions, most of them Sufi (some from Jama'at Zayd), such as the Sahaba Brigades (Kata'ib al-Sahaba) and Ajnad al-Sham Brigades (Liwa' Ajnad al-Sham).<sup>176</sup> There was the Abu al-'Alamin Brigades (Liwa' Abu al-'Alamin) and the Imam al-Rafa'i Brigades (Liwa al-Imam al-Rifa'i) in Hama countryside, the Mahdi al-Sayadi Brigade (Katiba Mahdi al-Sayadi) in Halfaya in the Hama countryside, the Islamic al-Baz Battalions (Kata'ib al-Baz al-Islamiyya) in the Aleppo, Damascus, and al-Ma'arra countrysides, the 'Abd al-Qader al-Kilani Battalion (Katiba 'Abd al-Qader al-Kilani) and the Imam al-Nawawi Brigades (Katiba Imam al-Nawawi) in Hauran (within the Military Council formations in Hauran), the Shaykh Muhammad al-Hamid Battalion (Katiba al-Shaykh Muhammad al-Hamid), the Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaqfa Battalion (Katiba al-Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahman al-Shaqfa), the Abdal al-Sham Brigade (Liwa Abdal al-Sham) in Hama, the 'Izz al-Din bin 'Abd al-Salam Battalions (Kata'ib 'Izz al-Din bin 'Abd al-Salam) that spread in the coast and in the Aleppo and Damascus countryside, and the Naqshbandi battalions affiliated to the Capital Shield Brigade (Liwa Dir' al-'Asima) in the Damascus countryside. The same applies to several the first battalions that formed to protect civilians in Baba Amr, and the battalions that formed in the mountains along the coast.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> On Jama'at Zayd's tie to the Ghouta factions see: Al-Rifa'i, Layla and Amir, 'Obayda. "al-Shabaka al-'Alman'iyya al-Damashqiyya: min al-Nasha' hatta Tafakuk al-Qawa'id," Aljazeera.net, 19/7/2018. Available at <https://bit.ly/3nnBAQq> Accessed on 12/6/2020

<sup>177</sup> On Sufi battalions in Syria see: "al-Sufiyya La Yujahidun fi Suriyya fahum Yaktafun bi-Jihad ma Yusama al-Kalima wa Jihad al-Nafs?" on the blog *al-Sufiyya fi al-Thawra al-Suriyya*, 18 July 2013. Available at: =

## 6. The struggle for survival: Sufism and the rise of Jihadism

The regime's strategy in confronting the revolution was to transform it from a national revolution into a Sunni revolution (i.e., to divide the revolution by sect), divert it from a peaceful revolution to an armed revolution (which it achieved), and then shift it from a sectarian struggle to a struggle against terrorist groups, that is, to conflate Sunnism with transnational jihadi Salafism.<sup>178</sup>

Achieving this first required converting religion into a main element in the motives behind the political struggle, in order to separate it from the national demand, characterize the struggle as a civil war, and finally exclude minorities, Christians in particular, from the struggle in order to strip the revolution of its popular status (in that it was no longer composed of social formations representing the diversity of the population). This is a tactic that Hafez al-Assad utilized with success in diverting the 1979 uprising and transforming it into a sectarian struggle between the secular "Alawite regime and an extremist Muslim organization. Making the struggle a sectarian one succeeded mainly because the political system had already been divided by sect with the previous "Alawization" of authority.<sup>179</sup>

The brutal repression and torture of civilians was described as 'Alawite with the intentional accentuation of the 'Alawite identity,<sup>180</sup>

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= [http://soufi-syr.blogspot.com/2013/07/blog-post\\_7569.html](http://soufi-syr.blogspot.com/2013/07/blog-post_7569.html)  
Accessed on 12/6/2020

<sup>178</sup> On the regime's strategy to divide the revolution along sectarian lines see: Bishara. *Suriyya Darb al-Alalam*, p. 318

<sup>179</sup> On the Alawization of the authorities see: Bishara. *al-Ta'ifa*, p. 363-371

<sup>180</sup> Starting with the humiliation of the people of al-Bayda, who were surrounded by 'Alawite villages, up to the massacre by cold weapons and knives that targeted the Sunni population and vulnerable groups in the villages surrounding the Alawite villages or in which Alawite residents lived. Twenty such massacres were committed in twenty months in Syria: six massacres in Homs, five in Hama, three in Rif Damascus, two in Baniyas and one in each of the cities of Aleppo, Daraa, Idlib, and Deir ez-Zur. The most horrific of these massacres is the Houla massacre (25 May 2012) in which 49 children were killed, including infants with their skulls split open, and 34 women, some of them pregnant with their stomachs =

concurrent with a set of practices intended to characterize the crackdown as 'Alawite. Detainees and protestors were forced to kneel before a picture of Bashar Assad while being asked "Who is your God?" then forced to say: "Bashar Assad is our God." Such scenes were later published and circulated.<sup>181</sup> This was accompanied by the systematic bombardment of mosques and minarets, in scenes never before seen in history, in this region or anywhere else in the world.<sup>182</sup>

Assad had released the jihadi Salafists from the prisons, in particular al-Qaeda and Islamic State detainees in Iraq in May 2011. He also eased the movement of jihadists, with the assistance of the Iranians through al-Maliki by facilitating the escape of 540 detainees from Islamic State prisons in jihadi-controlled Iraq in July 2013. This operation was thought by most to be orchestrated<sup>183</sup> to strengthen Salafi jihadism in Syria, whose network had been fostered by the regime since 2013 to be used against the Americans in Iraq.

All this was accompanied by bitter disappointment in the international community. The regime was killing and torturing civilians and no one was stopping it. Soon battalions with Islamic names started appearing in the countryside, and the regime was able to keep the revolution out of the large cities. At the beginning of 2012, al-Qaeda Salafi jihadism appeared in the form of by Al-Nusra Front

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= cut open. See: National Coalition Press Office *Bil-Sakin: al-Majazir al-latti Irtakabaha al-Assad bi-l-Silah al-Abyad*, Report No. 39, 2013.

<sup>181</sup> Examples of such cases can be seen in the following clips: "Ajbaruhu 'ala Qawl la Ilah Illa Bashar thumma Qataluhu" on the TOP ARAB SOCIAL MEDIA channel on YouTube, 9/9/2011. Accessed on 13/6/2020 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luVsVqMotJ4> and "Ta'dhib Suri wa Ijbarhu 'ala al-Sujud li-Sura Bashar" on YouTube. Published 23/1/2012. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUog6yF70Hk> Accessed on 13/6/2020

<sup>182</sup> See for example, the video clip titled "Qasf al-Maadhn fi Suriyya", Al-Arabiya, 13/8/2011. Available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE\\_ouvqVR4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OE_ouvqVR4s) Accessed on 16/6/2020

<sup>183</sup> See for example, the statement of the Iraqi Minister of Justice Hassan al-Shamri in Abu Rumman, Muhammad and Abu Hanifa, Hassan, *Tanthim "al-Dawla al-Islamiyya": al-Azma al-Sunniyya wa-l-Sira' 'ala al-Jihadiyya al-'Alimiyya*, p, 12, note 148.

for the People of the Levant (Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham), under the leadership of Abu Mohammed al-Julani.

*a. The rise of Salafism and decline of Sufism*

Assad succeeded in shifting the revolution to the outer regions, and when militarization started, most of the battalions were formed in the countryside then moved toward the cities. Naturally, poverty, lack of development, and marginalization make the rural environment more receptive to extremist Salafi thought. Moreover, the various forms of wanton violence, including massacres, that the Syrian regime committed against the population, the symbolic sectarian violence, and the disappointment in the international community's failure to intervene to protect civilians, combined with increasing Iranian interference and the spread of Salafi ideology among most armed battalions to draw a new map for Salafism in Syria. All these factors enhanced opportunities for the spread of extremist thought, which met violence with further sacrifice and rigidity, and provided an ideal environment for the spread of Salafism among the fighters.

Jihadi Salafism rose and many of its ideas spread, even in organizations and factions within the Free Army. However, the Salafism that spread in the ranks of these organizations did not constitute a coherent ideological system but only consisted of various ideas and convictions taken from Salafi jihadism that formed as reactions during the fighting. Most of these organizations wanted to establish a modern democratic state. This applies to many of the battalions formed by children of educated people from the cities.

This was seen in the areas where the regime had been expelled and that were controlled by such battalions. The Islamic battalions and Salafi jihadists took advantage of the climate and became the strongest organizationally. They acquired a large popular base with administrative control over these regions, establishing what they called the "Shari'a authorities," and a security system to control the situation and impose "Islamic Administration." This was an experiment drawn from Afghanistan and Iraq, first tested in Aleppo in July 2012 after the liberation of more than half of the city.



With this rise of Salafism both as an ideological and administrative force at the local level, Sufism retreated noticeably, and most battalions with a Sufi orientation disappeared. However, the administrative practices of the Shari'a authorities started to have adverse results for jihadi organizations and jihadi Salafi ideology. Four elements in particular angered the local population. First was the imposition of an extremist lifestyle the likes of which Syrians had never experienced in its entire history with Islam. Islam in the Levant is characterized by its kindness and tolerance, which made it difficult to accept this other model. Second was the presence of foreign fighters, who were allowed to participate in the administrative leadership and governance of the regions. Third, the low regard for human life.

*b. Torn spirits: post-jihadi Salafism confusion*

The greatest turn against jihadi Salafism started at the end of 2013. It appeared after the division of al-Nusra Front (Jabhat al-Nusra) in March 2013 when the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant seized control of a large border arc north of Aleppo and Idlib, and tried to take complete control of the border crossings that were the last hope of the opposition. They used all bloody means to make the factions and population submit, at which point Jaysh al-Mujahidin (Army of Mujahideen)<sup>184</sup> was formed out of Free Army factions that were sometimes influenced by Salafi ideology and sought to expel the Islamic State to the Badia.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Jaysh al-Mujahidin was formed from seven factions in Aleppo on 2 January 2014: Nour al-Din al-Zanki Islamic Battalions (Kata'ib Nur al-Din al-Zanki al-Islamiyya), al-Ansar Brigade (Liwa al-Ansar), the "Stand Straight as I Ordered" Group (Tajamu' fa-Istaqim kama Amart), Islamic Freedom Brigade (Liwa al-Huriyya al-Islami), Islamic Glory Brigade (Liwa Amjad al-Islam), Supporters of the Caliphate Brigade (Liwa Ansar al-Khilafa), Islamic Light Movement (Harakat al-Nur al-Islamiyya), Soldiers of the Two Mosques Brigade (Liwa Jund al-Haramain). See Jaysh al-Mujahidin's declaration on YouTube: "I'lan T'asis "Jaysh al-Mujahidin" on the Halab al-Youm channel, 2/1/2014.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=izKtlM0KFeA> Accessed on 13/6/2020.

<sup>185</sup> See Arab Center Policy Analysis Unit, *Intilaqat al-Muwajjha ma' Da'ish 'ala Abwab Jinif*, Position Report (Doha: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2014). Available at the following link: [https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document\\_FFBD521D.pdf](https://www.dohainstitute.org/ar/lists/ACRPS-PDFDocumentLibrary/document_FFBD521D.pdf) Accessed on 13/6/2020. =

This military coup reflected a psychological coup as well, clearly seen in the relief on the faces of the people in those regions. However, the negative experience with this organization and the Salafi jihadism that had ravaged the land with corruption and lawlessness was not just a phase that shook religiosity. While Syrians suffered under the Assad regime and its brutality, they had suffered exponentially more under these organizations. Later, when the Islamic State announced the establishment of the caliphate of the Islamic State on 29 July 2014, placing vast areas of Syrian territory under the “Islamic Caliphate,” the images the organization had created through its brutality and the atrocities committed under its rule to force the population to submit shook the belief in religion itself. Was this horrific image the manifestation of true religion?

The conduct and brutality of this organization was not just a barrier to the revolution that posed religious questions. The organization’s overthrow and fall posed religious questions as well, questions about the relationship of faith to victory and defeat, since it was defeated by communist Kurds (SDF, PYD) supported by weapons and firearms from conservative or extremist American Christians.

After more than nine extremely harsh years of war and violence in which religion was a fundamental component, Sufi orders were considerably weakened. The areas controlled by ISIS and Salafi jihadism nearly wiped out Sufi orders completely, either by displacing or killing their shaykhs. As the long war evolved, there were few followers left for those shaykhs that remained, as the younger followers either emigrated or were forced into conscription after the collapse of the regime’s military institution structures. With the youth either homeless, conscripted, murdered, or martyred, all the shaykhs had left was the elderly that remained, and they would face a great struggle to win them back after the war had shaken people’s faith.

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= Also see: al-’Okda, Ahmad. “Hurub Da’ish fi Halab wa Rifiha Mundhu Ab 2013 wa hatta Ab 2015”, *Orient.net*, 31/8/2018, at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3mlk0eH> Accessed on 13/6/2020.

Barely any Sufi battalions remained, except for a small number of battalions in the Levant Front (al-Jabha al-Shamiyya) military faction north of Aleppo (the “Euphrates Shield” region). These groups were struggling to survive, given the erosion of funding and the growing disagreements with the Turkish ally that appeared occasionally,<sup>186</sup> and the continued infighting of and with the factions around it.

After all these experiences and tragedies, popular religion, Sufi in essence, was no longer the same; it was no longer one similar version as was observed in Damascus and Aleppo, for example. Civilians in general were exposed to difficult trials that posed existential questions: Where is God in all this suffering? Children have been killed and burned alive, their bodies disfigured. Many have been slaughtered and others killed by every type of weapon, from chemical weapons to ballistic missiles, air bombardment, and depleted uranium, and still they were dying every day. Why didn't God intervene to end their suffering? Why weren't their prayers answered? Who could be more sincere than them, suffering under this great affliction? Is Islam really what the Islamic State believed in and applied? What is religion's relationship to cruelty?

## 7. Where to turn?

These hard questions and others like them highlight two basic needs of human existence,<sup>187</sup> psychological safety and belonging. This level of challenge to basic needs must lead to a religious conversion, to use a term from the psychology of religion. Unfortunately, there are no field studies available yet on religious conversion among Syrians inside Syria and abroad who have emigrated or become refu-

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<sup>186</sup> See the video clip on YouTube “*Tasrib Sawti Mutadawal li-Qiyadi bi-Fasil ‘al-Jabha al-Shami’ Yuwaddah An Turkiya Qata’at ‘anhum al-Rawatib*” Al-Hadath channel at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9S-GIEsPHo>. Accessed on 13/6/2020.

<sup>187</sup> On the basic psychological needs of humans see the definition of Abraham Maslow's theory from the APA Dictionary, “Maslow's theory of human motivation,” on the American Psychology Association website at the following link: <https://dictionary.apa.org/maslows-theory-of-human-motivation> Accessed on 13/6/2020.

gees, which is about half the population. Certainly, a large portion of them suffer from the effects of what is known in psychology as “shock” or “post-traumatic stress,” an ideal environment for religious conversion.

In 2013, at the peak of jihadism’s ascent, the percentage of those that believed in the importance of religion in life decreased by around 8% from the previous year, contrary to the prevailing image, as the belief in the importance of religion in general for Syrians is less than for Arabs in general, according to an international field report.<sup>188</sup> Meanwhile, a field study conducted on Syrian refugees in the city of Istanbul on patterns of religiosity found that there was no relationship between social relations with non-Muslims and religiosity among Syrians. The study also found that there was no relation linking religiosity with listening to songs, for example, something that is considered in stricter circles to be a religious prohibition. Other study findings include that relations on the basis of religion are nearly non-existent and the impact of religion on various types of cultural and social activities are also nearly non-existent. Most individuals in the study sample said they preferred a democratic political government with an Islamic background, as exemplified by the Turkish Justice and Development Party.<sup>189</sup>

On 21 February 2017, an unknown Marxist writer published an article in *Tal’ana ‘ala al-Huriyya* (Rising for Freedom), a magazine edited and published in Ghouta, Damascus, about a Syrian child, ‘Abd al-Basit al-Satuf, whose feet were cut off in a bombardment, and the

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<sup>188</sup> Gallup: 2015 report. A summary of the report with regard to Arab countries can be viewed at: “*Taqrir al-Tanmiya al-Insaniyya al-‘Arabiyya li-l-‘Am 2016: al-Shabab wa Afaq al-Tanmiya al-Insaniyya fi Waqi’ Mutaghayir*” (Beirut: UNDP, 2016), p.29. The full report can be Accessed on the United Nation’s website at the following link:

<https://www.un.org/ar/esa/ahdr/pdf/ahdr16.pdf><https://www.un.org/ar/esa/ahdr/pdf/ahdr16.pdf> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

<sup>189</sup> Al-Sa’d, Hussam and Mustafa, Tallal. *Al-Tadayun wa Anmat al-Haya al-‘Amma ‘and al-Shabab al-Suri: Dirasa Maydaniyya fi Madina Istanbul* (Istanbul: Harmoon Center, 2018), p. 34-35. The full study can be accessed at the following link: <https://harmoon.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Religiosity-and-public-life-patterns-among-Syrian-youth.pdf> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

famous video clip documenting the moment he was found in the rubble calling out to his father, “Baba, carry me,”<sup>190</sup> one of many horrific clips. The writer discusses the incident from an atheist perspective, and uses it as an entry point to call for abandoning faith in God, whose authority has been conflated, according to the writer, “with the authority of the state and the authority of the father” over the lives of Syrians. The writer says this has led to “the production of terrorism” and in order to eliminate this terrorism we must “dismantle” these three authorities.

The article sparked widespread anger on social media. Many thought the article had misused the child’s pain to support the atheist cause. Shaykhs attacked the article and warned against promoters of atheism whose numbers were increasing “in these days.”<sup>191</sup> As a result of this attack, the article was withdrawn and removed from the magazine’s official websites and social media. The editor in chief issued a strong apology for publishing the article, expressing its “regret,” and added that “the magazine’s policy since its beginning and throughout its years of publication has been based on the principle of respect for religion and the feelings of believers everywhere.”<sup>192</sup> In fact, the apology was not due so much to the conviction of the magazine’s editorial board as much as it was out of fear for the magazine’s staff in its Duma office receiving death threats from Islamic factions, in particular Jaysh al-Islam. This incident also represents a testimony on the results of prior field studies that posed the subject of faith, religion, and the catastrophes of war for public discussion for the first time.

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<sup>190</sup> See clip on YouTube titled “*Sarkhat Tifl Mu’lima ‘Ya Baba, Shilni’ fi Baldat Hobait...*”, STEP News channel, 16 February 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jv48pcxtaw> Accessed on 14/6/2020

<sup>191</sup> The most prominent is “*Kalimat Fadilat al-Shaykh Osama al-Rifa’i bi-sha’n ma Tamm Nashruhu fi Majalla ‘Tala’na ‘al-Hurriyya’*”, 10 March 2017, available at the following link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyUUIjlbS\\_8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eyUUIjlbS_8) Accessed on 14/6/2020

<sup>192</sup> Al-Sadfi, Laila. “*Tal’ana ‘ala al-Hurriyya: I’tidhar wa Tawdih’*”, *Tal’ana ‘ala al-Hurriyya*, 7 March 2017. Article can be read at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3adyVWW> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

On 21 May 2019, Sada, a Syrian organization specializing in public opinion surveys operating in Turkey, published the results of a survey conducted between April 1 and April 25, 2019 on a sample of Syrian youth of both genders. It included 1050 youth ranging in age from 19 to 28 on religious observance. The results of the survey showed that more than 91% are observant (religious), but 68% had weak religious observation (less than 50% of what was expected). Only 9% were atheists or not religious (the survey did not provide further clarification).<sup>193</sup> The results of this survey were in line with the results of the questionnaires mentioned above, that assert, despite their scarcity, the nature of religiosity among Syrians, especially in this period.

Finally, on 15 June 2020, a new study on Syrian youths' visions for the future of Syria was published, based on a random sampling of 800 people ranging in age from 18 to 35 years old inside and outside Syria. The results showed that 46% of those asked would prefer not to implement the Shari'a in the various areas of life, while 61.5% of them supported the application of the Shari'a in certain areas,<sup>194</sup> such as civil status. This reinforces the idea that there is a "strong reaction" to types of governance and the strict religiosity that accompanies it, which they experienced with extremist organizations as well as with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

These results from varying dates show a substantial difference from the stereotypical image of Syria with the rise of jihadi Salafism. While scarce, these studies show how misleading such an image is. Yet is it not logical for the war, which has lasted nearly ten years now, with its atrocities, perhaps exceeded only by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, to lead to psychological trauma and existential questions for all? This should be assumed, even without any studies; it is almost inevitable. It has in fact happened, and it is possible to

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<sup>193</sup> Berro, Mohammed. "Ittjihat al-Shabab al-Suri Tijah al-Siyasa wa-l-I'lam," Mu'assasa SADA li-l-Abhath wa-Istitla' al-ra'y, 21/5/2019. Available at the following link: <http://www.sadasy.org/?p=722> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

<sup>194</sup> Various researchers. *Tasawwurat al-Shabab al-Suri li-Suriyya al-Mustaqbal* (Istanbul: Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies, 2020), p. 20. The full study is available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/2LEpkx6> Accessed on 15/6/2020.

watch the repeated calls for help from the victims and their questions about God's failure to protect them or even seek their protection.

It seems that the public space for religion's presence in Syrians' lives has not changed greatly. However, two elements have changed. First is the type and form of religion. Second is the marked spread of the phenomenon of full religious conversion.<sup>195</sup> This spread has remained limited in general,<sup>196</sup> and leads to further research on the forms of religious conversion, on which, unfortunately, there is a total lack of field studies.

In religious psychology, religious conversion takes various forms. It can range from a person with no religious beliefs converting to a religion, known as an "awakening," to a person remaining religious and changing their type of religiosity to move completely to a new religion, called an "ideological conversion."<sup>197</sup> These are the two most widespread forms of religious conversion. Uncontrollable suffering makes the need for belief (whether religious belief or the denial of religion) overcome the desire for knowledge and even for justice itself,<sup>198</sup> because its main motive is the search for meaning, and for internal security and rectification of the image of the surrounding world.

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<sup>195</sup> See al-'Ali, Sham. "Fi tasa'id rafid al-Khitab al-Dini bayn al-Suriyyin", *al-Jumhuriyya* (website), 15 March 2017. Available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/2WgwI3F> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

<sup>196</sup> Khadij, Huzan. "Tahawwulat al-Mujtama' al-Suri...al-Ladiniyun wa-l-Inkifa' 'an al-Din", *Al-Arab*, London, 3/8/2017. Available at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3mtOxap> Accessed on 14/6/2020.

<sup>197</sup> Some psychologists say there are six types, as follows: (1) awakening (connected to the type of religiosity and not a full conversion), (2) mystical (prior mystical experience), (3) affective, (4) forced (external religious coercion), (5) intellectual (the search for an alternative), (6) experiential (arising from some personal experience with an alternative). See: Kusah, 'Ali and Aytan, 'Ali. *Ilm al-Nafs al-Dini* (Doha: Hamad Bin Khalifa University Press, 2020), p. 165.

<sup>198</sup> Kristeva, Julia. *This Incredible Need to Believe*, translated as *al-Haja al-Mudhila ila al-I'tqad* by Hanan Darqawi (Rabat: Mu'minun Bilad Hudud, 2019), p. 124.

There is a conclusive link between political violence, the emergence of fundamentalism, and the spread of fundamentalist ideas pushing human beings to the point of brutality through the strong need for firm beliefs to hang on to in order to survive. However, violence creates a general tendency and religious conversion remains a purely individual process and is not a coordinated or organized collective movement; rather it is generally linked to the personal experiences of each individual person. It is understood that the more intense painful experiences are, the more they raise existential questions, and these experiences in general will determine the shape and destination of religion.<sup>199</sup>

In general, it is possible to say that religious conversion in Syria is concentrated in two main forms. First, is an awakening of the type “the return to the religious values in whose environment I grew up and neglected for a period, regardless of the type of religion arising with this return” or “the return to religion.” Second, is completely leaving behind religion and other religious frameworks and even the culture in which they were raised and moving to a new belief (which might not be a new religion) and beginning a different life course that will lead to a new identity allowing them to reformulate themselves in a fundamental way. This type of conversion involves the highest levels of suffering, and takes time, and is influenced by various factors, some emotional and some intellectual, and all interacting to determine the final conversion.<sup>200</sup>

### **Conclusion: Is there a return to Sufism?**

Inasmuch as the revolution freed Syrians from subordination, raised critical abilities to unprecedented levels, and, with the harsh experience of jihadi Salafism, constituted an experience of religion in its most horrific form, it is no longer possible to expect that the words of shaykhs and religious figures would have the same impact as before the revolution. This makes it likely that a transformation in the formulation of popular religion among Syrians, Sufi in nature, will

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<sup>199</sup> Kusah, ‘Ali and Aytan, ‘Ali. *‘Ilm al-Nafs al-Dini*, p. 137, 155.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid, p. 138, 144.



arise, pushing toward a new formulation of religion that will have to deal with two matters. First, providing psychological safety (spiritual refuge) in order to survive, and second, an alternative positive vision of religion (rectifying its image) supporting the first objective. No doubt the Sufi aspect will remain firm in this serious return to faith, yet it is hard to predict what that final formulation will be without field research to uncover its indicators.

The Sufism latent in this religion taking shape is presumed to take form as a new beginning of life and a form of individual liberation from the nightmare of the lived world. It could not be further from the theology of political liberation. Political liberation in the shadow of the war and its enduring hell suits only rigid beliefs that idealize sacrifice and icons, eliminating spaces for forgiveness. That is, the Salafi beliefs that could be called a sort of “liberation theology.”

However, the war is still raging. Religious conversion and the changing formulation of the relation between religious conversion and Sufism is dependent upon the coming transformations. Lifestyle, the role of civil society organizations, and the nature of public life to be lived by Syrians later will define the future of Sufi orders. These orders appear more and more vulnerable and perhaps face extinction in the long term, if there are alternatives and institutions meeting the needs once met by such orders.

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# THE ARAB SPRING AND TRANSFORMATIONS IN SUFI DISCOURSE IN MOROCCO

*Mountassir Hamada*

When the Arab Spring broke out in January 2011, it played a role in enacting several transformations in religious discourse throughout the Arab world. These shifts were taking place across the board—in the discourse produced by official religious institutions, Islamist movements (whether proselytizing, political or militant), Salafi currents, and Sufi orders.

This study aims to examine some of the transformations that have distinguished Sufi discourse. It draws particular attention to the model of Morocco, where Sufism has taken much deeper root than Salafi or Brotherhood religiosities. This article sheds light on the characteristics and consequences of this particular transformation in Morocco, and will present four key points before coming to its conclusion.

## **1. Transformations of Religious Discourse in the Arab Region**

This study takes as its premise the notion that the events of the Arab Spring contributed to creating changes in the production of religious discourse by various actors in the region. Although we focus our discussion on the question of Sufi discourse, this issue has implications for religious discourse in the region as a whole.

In using “religious discourse” in this context, we refer to a wide variety of religious actors: those connected to state-affiliated national religious institutions (that is, institutions designated to safeguard religious politics in the region), religious discourses embodied in Is-

lamist movements (in their three different branches: proselytizing,<sup>201</sup> political,<sup>202</sup> and militant<sup>203</sup>), Salafi currents, and Sufi orders, the last of which concerns us most in this study.

1) If we begin with the transformations that have occurred in the discourse of religious institutions, we might highlight some of the developments that have taken place with many of these institutions. For example, in Egypt during the Arab Spring, al-Azhar issued three main documents that have been called the “Azhar documents,” which are: “The al-Azhar Document on Egypt’s Future” (*Wathiqat al-Azhar hawla Mustaqbal Misr*,” 19 June 2011), “The al-Azhar Document on the Arab Spring (*Wathiqat al-Azhar bi-Khusus al-Rabi’al-‘Arabi*, 31 October 2011), and “The al-Azhar Document on a System for Basic Freedoms” (*Wathiqat Manzumat al-Hurriyat al-Asasiyya*, 8 January 2012).

2) With regard to Islamist movements, especially “political Islamists,” the events of the Arab Spring offered an opportunity to test scholar Asef Bayat’s thesis about “post-Islamism,” which he had written about prior to 2011. This concerns the transformations taking place in forms of Islamism that are involved in politics, particularly in the context of Morocco, Tunisia, and France:

In Morocco, it was clear that the performance of the Justice and Development party had been relatively modest compared to the hopes pegged on it prior to the Arab Spring. The party’s position, and that of its affiliated Islamist proselytizing Movement for Unity and Reform, helped draw attention to secular discourses in Morocco. The oversight of religious affairs would continue to rest with the king in his capacity as Commander of the Faithful (*imarat al-mu’minun*). Islamists, modernizers, and secularists were all kept from supervising

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<sup>201</sup> This includes “proselytizing” organizations, as well as Salafi currents that practice proselytizing separately from their political (i.e. militant) work, such as the Madkhali-Salafi (“Quietist Salafi”) movement.

<sup>202</sup> This includes political parties arising from Islamist movements, such as the Moroccan Justice and Development party.

<sup>203</sup> This includes al-Qa’ida, organization or the al-Nusra front, ISIS, and all the militant Islamist movements.

religious affairs, but were allowed to contribute in some limited ways, within previously agreed-upon boundaries.

In Tunisia, this matter became so complex that the leadership of the Ennahda movement stated that it would be necessary to think about creating a theoretical separation between political Islam and *da'wa*, in hopes of translating this separation from theory to practice later. There is indeed a discussion taking place about separating political work from *da'wa* in Islamist movements involved in political work. However, in most cases these discussions do go not beyond stating intentions; we would need to see Islamist movements state a clear timeframe to be sure what might happen.

In France, due to the transformations that have happened in Islamist discourse in the Arab region as a whole, the leadership of Islamist movements there, namely the ***Union des organisations islamiques de France***, was forced to change its name to *Musulmans de France*. This was the result of the political, cultural, religious, and security-related turmoil that Islamist movements stirred up in France.

3) As for Salafism, it is worth examining the implications of the publication of the book *Post-Salafism*, and the many connotations such a title holds in light of the events following January 2011.<sup>204</sup> We have witnessed many unexpected transformations in the Salafi project in the Arab region,<sup>205</sup> including the emergence of Salafism in Alexandria (in Egypt), the founding of the al-Nour party, and its subsequent participation in elections.

4) Since the 9-11 attacks, much greater attention has been paid to Sufi discourse, by the media and academic commentators in both local and foreign institutions. Without this particular sequence

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<sup>204</sup> Ahmad Salem, Amr Bassiouny, *Ma Ba'd al-Salafiyya: Qira'at Naqdiyya li-l-Khitab al-Salafi al-Mu'assir*, Markaz Nama' li-l-Buhuth wa-l-Dirasat, Beirut, first edition, 2015, p. 696.

<sup>205</sup> We recommend the following two books on this subject: Muhammad Abu Rumman, *Al-Salafiyyin wa-l-Rabi' al-'Arabi*, Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, 2013, and Henri Lauzière, *Sina'at al-Salafiyya: al-Islah al-Islamifi al-Qarn al-'Ishrin* (The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century), trans. Osama 'Abbas and Omar Bassiouny, Dar al-Nadim and Dar Rawafed, 2018.

of events, there would not have been such sustained academic and media interest. There have also been some modest shifts in the practice of Sufism, but to a lesser extent—unlike what we observed in the region directly after the Arab Spring.

Thus, we can say with certainty that religious discourse in the Arab region— whether that of religious institutions, Islamist movements, Salafi currents, or Sufi orders— is experiencing a series of theoretical transformations. This first began to take shape in the context of the serious duress that the region experienced, alongside the political, security, and strategic interactions that took place in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup>, and later during the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Clearly, Sufis could not remain separate from or unconcerned with these shifts. They were at the center of these transformations, especially since the Sufi presence in the Arab region was a counterbalance against Islamism, especially in Morocco, Mauritania, Egypt, and Sudan. As a result of their political and strategic engagements, Sufism became involved in open conflicts about the administration of religion, and was placed in competition with other actors speaking in the name of religion. Many of these conflicts were with Islamists engaged in proselytizing, political, and militant activities.

In this study, we will examine the transformations that have distinguished Sufi discourse in Morocco during the last two decades, particularly after events of the “Arab Spring,” which is the subject of two of the upcoming sections.

## 2. Moroccan Sufism after the September 11 Attacks

Western policy-makers increasingly began to discuss Sufism after the attacks of September 11, 2001, which brought sudden attention to the issues of “Salafism,” “Wahhabism” and “jihadism.” Western actors criticized political Islamism in its militant or “jihadist” forms, and turned instead towards “traditionalist Islam” and *tariqa*-based Sufism. The West was even discussing relying on the support of these so-called moderate Islamists during an existential war that was to take place between the US administration and “jihadist” Islamist movements.

Three years after the 9-11 attacks, there were reports published in the US calling for encouraging Sufi orders. In particular, there were two famous reports issued by the RAND Corporation, the first of which was entitled *Civil Democratic Islam* (2004).<sup>206</sup> It argued that:

“traditionalists and Sufis probably constitute the large majority of Muslims. They are often, but not always, conservative Muslims who uphold beliefs and traditions passed down through the centuries—1,400 years of Islamic traditions and spirituality that are inimical to fundamentalist ideology... They interpret the Islamic scriptures on the basis of the teachings of the schools of jurisprudence... Immediately relevant to this study is the fact that Salafis and Wahhabis are relentless enemies of traditionalists and Sufis.”

The second report by RAND, which is just as important as the first, was entitled *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*. In fact, the report devotes less space to Sufism, and defines moderates as those whose “traditions incorporate the veneration of saints (and the offering of prayers at their tombs) at other practices that are anathema to Wahhabis ... [and who] do not engage in unmediated interpretation of the Qur’an and the hadith.”<sup>207</sup>

It is clear that the RAND corporation’s engagement with this matter, as well as that of other think tanks is unrelated to the earlier engagement of some Western figures with Sufism prior to the September 11 attacks. In the context of what is almost a world war against religious violence and extremism, the engagement with Sufism that we see in these two reports can be characterized as explicitly pragmatic. It was not until after the 9-11 attacks that analysts concluded that the “rejection of Sufi teachings and interpretations (*ijtihād*) are among the most significant losses the Islamic world had suf-

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<sup>206</sup> Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Peter Chalk, C. Christine Fair, Theodore W. Karasik, Rollie Lal, Ian O. Lesser, and David E. Thaler, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, RAND Corporation, 2004.

<sup>207</sup> “Road Map for Moderate Network Building in the Muslim World,” pp. 65-89 in Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz and Peter Sickles, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks*, RAND Corporation, 2007.



ferred.” Western analysts and scholars thus came to see Sufism as a fundamental part of Islam, and especially of the Islamic world’s “modernity,” as Joseph Lumbard put it.<sup>208</sup>

These two reports clearly view extremist Islamist movements as responsible for minimizing the role of Sufism. Meanwhile, Wahhabis were demonized even more harshly by Western analysts after the 9-11 attacks. Muslim audiences were thus confronted with what appeared to be an “academic conflict on the merits of Wahhabism.” On one side was Bernard Lewis, who devoted a full chapter to “demonizing Wahhabism” in one of his books.<sup>209</sup> On the other side was French scholar Charles Saint-Prot, who also devoted a full chapter to Wahhabism as a “reformist religious movement reviving more than one fundamentalist sectarian ideology.”<sup>210</sup>

Despite the increasing focus on Sufism in the West, and the interest of some leaders in the Arab region in rehabilitating Sufism, some questions (which my previous work has touched upon) have been ignored.<sup>211</sup> Some of these key questions are:

- To what extent can we successfully employ Sufi religiosity to counter militant religiosity or violent extremism?
- What is the nature of Sufi writings that have been referenced by jurists in jihadist movements, including “violent extremist” organizations?

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<sup>208</sup> Joseph E.B. Lumbard, *Al-Islam wa-l-Usuliya wa-Khiyana al-Mawruth al-Islami: Abhath Katabaha Bahithun Muslimun Gharbiyyun* (Islam and Fundamentalism and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars), foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and trans. Saber al-Asri, Mansurat Wizarat al-Awqaf wa-l-Shu’un al-Islamiyya al-Maghribiyya, Rabat, first edition, 2007, p. 109.

<sup>209</sup> Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>210</sup> See the second chapter of Charles Saint-Prot, *Islam: l’avenir de la Tradition entre révolution et occidentalisation* on the origins of this reformism, Monaco: Editions du Rocher, 2008, p. 239-356. The chapter is entitled “Mohammad Ibn Abdel Wahhab.”

<sup>211</sup> Montassir Hamada, *Tawzif Atba’ Ibn ‘Arabi fi-l-Harb ‘ala Atba’ Bin Laden*, London: Al-Quds al-‘Arabi, issue 18 February 2007.

• How have the leaders of Sufi orders dealt with this question? That is to say, what have the shaykhs of different orders and *zawiyas* said, especially regarding decisions with political, cultural, and religious ramifications at that time? We recognize that Sufi literature includes various writings committed to keeping a distance from political engagement.<sup>212</sup> There are at least two important Sufi sayings we might reference here:

“Love of power is the last thing that stripped away from the heart of the initiate (*murid*).”

“If an initiate (*murid*) shows off so that others know that he is special, that is evidence of a lack of sincerity in his servitude to God.”<sup>213</sup>

### 3. The Context of September 11th and the Arab Spring

Although Sufi religiosity has long been present throughout the Arab region, as a kind of popular religiosity, intensive media and scholarly attention on the global scale was directed towards Sufism directly after the September 11 attacks. This happened first in Europe, because it was closest geographically to the countries of the Arab region, and because scholars there had a centuries-long history of engaging with Sufism, long before the US reports.

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<sup>212</sup> Some Western scholarship has dealt with the different branches of Sufism in Morocco, especially in Fez, which is sometimes called the cultural and spiritual capital (*al-'asima al-'ilmiyya*) of Morocco because it contains the oldest existing university in the world (the University of al-Qarawiyyin). See in particular the work of the American anthropologist Emilio Spadola: *The Calls of Islam: Sufis, Islamists, and Mass Mediation in Urban Morocco* (Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa), Indiana University Press, December 2013.

<sup>213</sup> This saying is drawn from a *hikma* of Ibn 'Atta' Allah al-Iskandari, who said “If you want people to know that you are special, that is evidence of your lack of sincerity in your servitude to God.” See: *Al-Hikam al-'Attai'yya li-l-Imam Taj al-Din Ahmad ibn 'Atta' al-Iskandari*, edited by Nizar Hamadi, Dar al-Imam ibn 'Arafa, Tunisia, first edition, 2010, p. 72.

If we look at the case of Morocco in particular, Sufism had been present for centuries. Indeed, Morocco is known as the “land of saints” (*balad al-awliya*) due to the significant Sufi presence there, both of individual Sufis and Sufi orders. By contrast, the *Mashriq* (the eastern part of the Arab world) is known as the “the land of prophets” (*balad al-anbia*) due to the fact that prophets appeared in that region in particular.

What distinguishes Sufism in general is that it has no connection with Islamist movements, that is, it did not circulate the same kind of religious discourse that Islamist movements were known for, at least in their beginnings. There was no talk of “emotional separation,” of *jahiliyya*, *hakimiyya* (sovereignty), or “loyalty and disavowal” (*al-wala’wa-l-bara*), etc. Instead, Sufism focuses on confronting the “greater enemy,” that is “love of the self” (*hawa al-dhat*) and worldly fortunes (*hazuz al-nafs*). Therefore, the “greater jihad,” according to Sufis, is to confront the love of the self.

In this context, Sufism became an issue that could be employed by the political authorities in Morocco to confront Islamism, especially in its militant form. This is because the political side of Islamism was concerned with political work or “the political shari’a,” as it is referred to in Islamist writings.

Religiosity in Morocco and the surrounding region is one of the most important factors that has pushed back against the resurgence of terrorism, unlike what we see in many other Arab countries.

We can see in Morocco what appears to be a kind of “stability” in the religious sphere, which engages with diverse forms of prevalent religiosities in Moroccan Islam. This might explain why religion in Morocco has become, in recent years, one of the most-studied and closely-followed issues, by both Arab and Western think tanks and researchers.

In this regard, we can consider Morocco to be a progressive model in the Arab and Islamic world in testing that contentious relationship between Islam and politics. In Morocco, there is the institution of the Commander of the Faithful (which brings together spiri-

tual and worldly authorities in the king) and the Islamist movements (which also blur the line between the political and the religious), as well as the Salafi currents and Sufi orders. Morocco has witnessed a fast pace of change, and deep transformations affecting political, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of all levels of individual and collective life. It has thus become directly engaged in societal debates and discussions about the question of identity, which appears to be taking place on at least two levels:

1) The institutional level, which is happening through a series of comprehensive reforms in the religious arena. There have also been efforts to restructure this space according to the particular features of Moroccan religiosity, and the different forms it takes (the Ash'ari creed, the Maliki school of jurisprudence, and Sufism following the school of al-Junayd). This has led to a reexamination of the functions of the institutions managing religious matters, and the relationships between these different institutions. It has also provoked a renewed interest in questions of religiosity and societal reform, through plans and programs that have alternated between education and the media.

2) The societal level, which has taken the form of escalating conflict between different political and cultural currents regarding the system of cultural and civilizational values in Morocco, which has led to a number of challenges about the issue of the family, the role of women, and linguistic controversies, in addition to debates about the arts, human rights, and individual and collective freedoms.

Within the diverse frameworks of Moroccan religiosity, we find that the prevailing variety is traditionalist and Sufi religiosity, which is different than the Islamist religiosity of movements with Salafi or Brotherhood forms. This is one of the most important reasons why Moroccan Islamist groups have criticized Sufism in Morocco, whether on the political level as is the case with the Brotherhood, or on a doctrinal level as is the case with the Salafis and Wahhabis.

In addition to reexamining traditional religiosity and the legacy of Sufism in Moroccan Islam, it is also worth considering that historical prevalence of the Maliki school of jurisprudence, and the substantial presence of the Ash'ari creed. The vision of this religious and cultural structure was laid out by Ibn 'Ashir when he said: "The Ash'ari creed, and Maliki jurisprudence, and the path of al-Junayd."<sup>214</sup> Because of this system, one Moroccan scholar affirmed that "moderate religiosity in Morocco is an alternative to extremism in North and West Africa."<sup>215</sup>

After 9-11, and particularly from early 2002, there was a marked interest in the "reformist" religious project, which was formally labelled the "restructuring of the religious sphere" in Morocco. The first step was appointing a new minister of endowments (*awqaf*) and Islamic affairs<sup>216</sup> from a Sufi order—the Qadiri-Boutchichi order, which is considered today to be one of the most important Morocco Sufi orders as a result of its prevalence both in the region and abroad.<sup>217</sup>

These developments came in the context of establishing religious policies that aimed to achieve two goals: preserving the key elements of Moroccan religious identity (i.e. the Ash'ari creed, Maliki

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<sup>214</sup> *Al-Durr al-Thamin wa-l-Mawrid al-Mu'in fi-Sharh al-Murshid al-Mu'in 'ala al-Daruri min 'Ulum al-Din li Ibn 'Ashir*, Dar al-Rashad al-Haditha, 1991 edition, p. 4. For more about the works of al-Junayd and his influence in Morocco, see: *Madrasat al-Junayd wa-Atharuha fi al-Tasawwuf al-Maghribi*, ed. Hakim al-Fadl al-Idrisi, Majallat al-Majlis (a periodical published by the Council of Senior Scholars of Morocco), issue 4, July 2008.

<sup>215</sup> Conversation between sociologist Muhammad Saghir Janjar and 'Abd al-'Ali Damiani, *Al-Ahdath al-Maghribiyya*, Casablanca, 11 February 2015.

<sup>216</sup> This was Ahmed Toufiq, a historian and novelist who was appointed to the position of director of the Institute for African Studies (at Mohammed V University) (1989-1995), and later became director of the National Library of Morocco in Rabat (1995-2002). He was appointed minister of endowments and Islamic affairs in 2002. He has written four novels and published scholarly works and is a follower of the Qadiri-Boutchichi Sufi order.

<sup>217</sup> For more on the Qadiri-Boutchichi order, see Mountassir Hamada, *Nahnu wa-l-Tasawwuf*, Rabat: Dar al-Shuruq, first edition, 2009.

jurisprudence, and the Sufism of al-Junayd), and containing religious extremism, including “violent extremism.”

The general outline of the new minister of endowments and religious affairs’ project did not go beyond the royal discourse on this matter, since the ministry was responsible for maintaining the kingdom’s religious affairs, like the other religious institutions. The project had at least two key features:

1) First, it outlined a new long-term strategy for the state to target the roots of “violence and terrorism” through social, economic, educational, and religious stances. This was a response to some analyses that connected the attacks on Casablanca with these stances.

2) Secondly, there was an effort to ensure the stability of royal institutions through affirming the institution of the Commander of the Faithful, and reconsidering its position and parameters. This was a clear message, both to Islamists who tried to invoke the religious authority of Islamist movements, and to secularists who were calling for the separation of religion and state.

The institution of the Commander of the Faithful is the ruling authority in the Morocco cultural sphere, which overlaps with the political and religious spheres. It establishes the rule of “a monarch with a secular approach,” that is, an institution with both political and religious dimensions. The king thus has the exclusive role in the religious sphere as Commander of the Faithful (*amir li-l-mu’minun*). This is a strategic position for him, since no other citizen, organization, or entity is thus permitted to speak in the name of religion in order to preserve the unity of the *umma* in its formulation as Maliki school and Asha’ri creed, and also the unity of all Moroccan citizens, whether Muslim or Jewish.

This has resulted in Morocco receiving significant media attention. Additionally, there was a high-level meeting in New York held the evening of 30 September 2014 by the Counter-Terrorism Committee of the UN Security Council, on the subject of “Countering In-

citement to Commit Terrorist Acts Motivated by Extremism and Intolerance: the Kingdom of Morocco's Approach and Experiences of other African States." The Moroccan minister of endowments and Islamic affairs affirmed that: "Combatting terrorism required establishing political legitimacy and supporting it through reform in all spheres, as well as the presence of religious leadership from the 'ulama' and imams who were qualified and aware of the principles (*maqasid*) of religion and the interests of the *umma* in accordance with the conditions of peace and fairness." He added that the "Moroccan experience remained exemplary in this field: in addition to king's position as the Commander of the Faithful, which gave him religious legitimacy, there was the Maliki school of jurisprudence and the Ash'ari creed, which are grounded in moderation, and serve the public good. There was also the spiritual side of Islam, known as Sufism, which focused on the ethics of dealing with people, and drew particular attention to the sanctity of other people."<sup>218</sup>

The Moroccan minister's focus on Sufism highlights its position as one of the key elements distinguishing Morocco in the context of the war on "jihadists." In Morocco, this shifting field remains primarily occupied by historical traditionalist and Sufi religiosities, to the extent that Morocco and its neighboring countries are described as the "land of saints" (whereas the eastern part of the Arab world is the "land of prophets"). Thus Moroccan leaders are depending upon Sufism to "intercede" and counter Islamist extremist discourse, whether in the form of Salafi extremist currents (or what the media and now some scholars call "Salafi-jihadists"), or those who belong to or sympathize with "al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb" (formerly "The Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat"), as well as ISIS.

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<sup>218</sup> 'Abdelhaq Ba Lachgar, *Irsa' al-Shari'a al-Siyasiyya wa-l-Tahakkum fi al-Ta'tir wa-l-Ta'awun al-Istikhbarati wa-Mubadarat al-Tanmiya al-Bashariyya: al-Mukhabarat wa-l-Awqaf wa-l-Shu'un al-Islamiyya wa-l-Kharijiyya Tuqaddimu Wasfat al-Maghrib li-Muharabat al-Irhab*, Akhbar al-Youm, Casablanca, 2 October 2014. There was further attention given to the role and authority of the institution of the Commander of the Faithful during the pope's visit to Morocco; the pope was formally invited by Morocco to visit on March 30-31, 2019.

Sufi religiosity in Morocco is at the core of the project of religious restructuring in Morocco in the post-9/11 era. It is part of the authentic religious and cultural heritage in Moroccan society, which has roots stretching back centuries, and which can be considered an entry point into maintaining the spiritual security of Moroccans, as well as a kind of inoculation against ideological extremism, whether material or religious.

#### 4. Sufism in Morocco and the Arab Spring

The efforts to rehabilitate Sufi religiosity in Morocco became more explicit during the period after 11 September, leading up to the Arab Spring. However, the results of these efforts became even clearer after the Arab Spring broke out in Morocco, in the 20 February Movement in 2011. There was a certain mobilization of Moroccan Sufi religiosity, and of the Boutchichi-Qadiri order, one of the most important Sufi orders in Morocco. Many political officials, intellectuals, and decision-makers belong to this order, the most prominent of whom is perhaps the minister of endowments and Islamic affairs Ahmed Toufiq.

In the intellectual sphere, specifically in the sphere of religious thought, we have the scholar Taha Abdurrahman, who became famous for his writings about ethics and logic especially prior to 2012.<sup>219</sup> There is also Ahmed Abbadi, the general secretary of the Muhammadan League of Religious Scholars, who was the leader of one of the Islamist movements connected to the Brotherhood, before he joined the Boutchichi-Qadiri Sufi order. He was joined by a group of officials

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<sup>219</sup> We can say that 2012 was a turning point, because after this year, Taha Abdurrahman (a Sufi) began to publish material that fell in the frightening category[?] of Islamist reform, “Al-Nazariya al-’timaniya” (or “Al-Nazariya al-Ikhlaqiyya), which contained indications of a developing political philosophy. In 2018, he published his book *Thughur al-Murabata*, which departs from Sufi discourse to some extent and expresses political positions that largely intersect with Islamist discourse (in any of its three varieties). This suggests that some re-examination was taking place within Sufi discourse, at least on the individual level, since it was coming from a scholar who was well-established in Morocco and the region, especially among Islamist movements in recent years.



from many state institutions (political, security, economic, cultural, etc.).

It is not a coincidence that many scholars and employees of the Muhammadan League of Religious Scholars, which Ahmad ‘Abbadi has headed since 2007, are also members of the Boutchichi-Qadiri order. This is unrelated to the research centers which are concerned with Sufism, such as the al-Junayd Center for Specialized Sufi Studies and Research,<sup>220</sup> because it is to be expected that a Sufi scholar would oversee the management of a center concerned with Sufi issues, as we have seen with other centers as well.

The most important features of Sufism’s explicit and formal entry into the Moroccan intellectual and political sphere occurred prior to the Arab Spring. However, this might be expected given the nationalist character of Moroccan Sufism, which did not have affiliations with Sufi groups further east or with Islamist movements there (except for the spiritual connection that characterizes Sufi discourse in general, similar to the doctrinal connection that unites Muslims as a whole). Moroccan Sufism relies on Sufism, Maliki jurisprudence, and the Ash’ari creed as sources of authority, and thus their connection is centered around a discourse of ethics, purification, and struggling against the self.

The Qadiri-Boutchichi order took political stances, including critical positions against insulting the Qur’an and the invasion of the Gaza Strip in 2006. There has also been preaching in ceremonies held by the order, such as one incident in which the king offered his condolences after the death of “Lala Tawous,” the wife of Shaykh Hamza, the previous *murshid* of the order. The audio recording of the occasion demonstrates the blessings of the order for all of the Moroccan monarch’s initiatives, and their support for his political positions such as the issue of the Western Sahara, among others. Their position was that as “the Commander of the Faithful for Moroccans, the king

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<sup>220</sup> This is a research center affiliated with the Muhammadan League of Religious Scholars; its headquarters is in the city of Oujda (in eastern Morocco), near the town Mudagh, where the headquarters of the Qadiri-Boutchichi Sufi order is located. The official website of this center is: <http://www.arrabita.ma/aljounaid>.

was able to put his hand on the country's wounds in order to reform Morocco."<sup>221</sup> Likewise, the order has criticized Nadia Yassinne, the leader of the banned opposition group "Al 'Adl wal Ihsane" which had argued that Morocco needed a republican system of governance, among other things.

Immediately after the Arab Spring broke out, there was one particular incident that was pivotal in the transformations that have distinguished Sufi institutional religiosity in Morocco.

In referring to institutional Sufi religiosity, we mean *tariqa*-centered religiosity, that is, Sufism as it is embodied in the Sufi orders. We are not referring to the phenomenon of individual Sufi believers that has also emerged in Morocco after the events of the "Arab Spring," whether Sufis who had been followers of orders but retained some distance from *tariqa*-centered religiosity, or Islamists (both Salafis and Brotherhood) who began to distance themselves from organized Islamism, or those entirely unaffiliated with Sufi orders but who were involved with Sufism on an individual level.

This incident made clear that the political emergence of the most important Sufi order was tied to the probability of Morocco falling into turmoil after the Arab Spring. The order had participated in a mass march on 26 June 2011, in which 300,000 people came out to protest the banned Al 'Adl wal Ihsane organization, which opposed the constitution as undemocratic. Mohamed Hamdaoui, a member of the General Secretariat of the group's political wing and of the *majlis al-irshad* (the 'guidance' council, the highest body within the Al 'Adl wal Ihsane organization) issued a statement that "the choice to boycott given the lack of serious transformation towards democracy is a decision made in accordance with mature civic values that we now recognize, and which form the basis of truly democratic work, and which repudiate all forms of manipulation, dissimulation, and fraud against the people in order to issue false decrees."<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> Hamza Boutchichi, "Sufi Yuwajihu al-Ahdath al-Siyasiyya min Qubbat al-Zawiya," *Mohammedia Presse* (website), 30 August 2009, <https://www.maghress.com/mohammediapress/941>.

<sup>222</sup> Statement issued in the weekly *Al-Hayat*, Casablanca, issue 145, 16 June 2011.

It is true that the official spokesperson for the Boutchichi order denied that the *zawiya* had any political ambitions or motives to attain power. He added that “the order intervenes only in major strategic matters,” with the aim of achieving the unity and stability of Morocco. Thus, “we came out to the street in force to support the new constitution, and before that for the Western Sahara question, and to oppose offensive drawings of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).”<sup>223</sup> It is hard to ignore the political determinants behind this incident for Sufi orders. Some media commentators drew attention to this point; one scholar affiliated with Islamist discourse said that “the *zawiya* [of the Boutchichi order] has taken on a political slant after the Arab Spring in order to create political equilibrium inside Morocco to allow the political regime to overcome the pressures of the Moroccan street, which has demanded radical reforms.” He added that it has “played a political role in countering the Al ‘Adl wal Ihsane group, which was sharply opposed to the Moroccan regime, and whose Shaykh Abdesslam Yassine was originally a Boutchichi before leaving the *zawiya*.”<sup>224</sup>

The indirect engagement of Sufism in the political arena<sup>225</sup> has had various repercussions for the image of Sufism, and also for followers of Sufi religiosity. Here we will examine two points in particular:

### 1) The Consequences of Going Beyond the Essence: Damaging the Image of Sufism

This dilemma has resulted in increased criticism of Sufi discourse. These critiques used to come from the discourse of Islamists, Salafis, Wahhabis, or the Brotherhood, but now we can also see pro-

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<sup>223</sup> Regarding the question of whether the Arab Spring prompted the *zawiya* of the Boutchichi order to found a political party, Sbai said: “the order will never become a political entity; our field is the education of individuals and the purification of souls.” See Omar al-‘Omari, “al-Zawiya al-Boutchichiyya wa-l-‘Amal al-Siyasi bi-l-Maghrib,” Aljazeera.net, 2 February 2012.

<sup>224</sup> ‘Omar al-‘Omari, *al-Zawiya al-Boutchichiyya wa-l-‘Amal al-Siyasi bi-l-Maghrib*.

<sup>225</sup> Here we are referring to *indirect* Sufi involvement in the political arena— not the emergence of a Sufi political party, but rather the engagement of Sufi actors in the political energy that Morocco witnessed during the “Arab Spring.”

ponents of leftist ideologies<sup>226</sup> criticizing Sufi discourse for its indirect or indirect involvement in the political sphere.

Although Salafism, the Brotherhood, and Sufism all draw upon Islamic authority (and the Asha'ri creed, the Maliki school, and Sufism), we have seen criticism of Sufi orders by Salafi, Wahhabi, and Brotherhood discourses. This is because of ideological and doctrinal considerations, among others, which is to be expected. It is enough for them to call forth old and renewed disputes between *Shari'a* and *haqiqa*, that is, between followers of Islamic jurisprudence versus Islamic mysticism.<sup>227</sup> However, the development in Morocco that took place directly after the Arab Spring was the emergence of critiques against Sufism, especially in practice rather than in theory. These critiques came from the Moroccan media and academy, drawing from an ideological authority that is unrelated to Islamic referents, but rather grounded in modernity, secularism, enlightenment, etc. This is especially true for those writers who were drawing upon political ideologies engaged in the political conflict against the monarchy, in spite of the reduced clout of these ideologies in Morocco for about the last two decades, as leftist, nationalist, and socialist ideologies have receded throughout the Arab region.

One of the shifts among Sufi writers was the involvement of some major Sufi thinkers in taking political-ideological stances that one would not have supposed came from Sufis. Perhaps the most important example here is the Moroccan scholar Taha Abdurrahman, who was a leading figure for Islamic ethics, that is, Islamic reform from an ethical standpoint, as a *faqir*<sup>228</sup> in the Qadari-Boutchichi or-

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<sup>226</sup> Regarding critiques from leftist ideologies, see Hind Arroub, *The King, Religion, the State, and Civil Society in Morocco: Can Think Tanks Help?* (2020) in [https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/66613/ssoar-2020-arroub-The\\_King\\_Religion\\_the\\_State.pdf?sequence=5](https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/66613/ssoar-2020-arroub-The_King_Religion_the_State.pdf?sequence=5)

<sup>227</sup> In spite of their theoretical and practical fallacies, these terms do indicate the distinction between jurisprudence and Sufism.

<sup>228</sup> The term *faqir* ("poor one") is used to refer to members of Sufi orders. Believers are understood to be spiritually impoverished, that is, that they are constantly searching to feed their spiritual readiness to resist the temptations of the self. Today, some Sufi believers are liberated from the traditional role or authority of the shaykh in Sufi education.

der. This also stands out in a group of works that he published directly after the “Arab Spring,” starting with his book *Ruh al-Din* (which included critical readings of Islamist and secular discourses as well as criticism of the religious institutions and Shi’i authorities. He even critiqued Sufi religiosity<sup>229</sup> before it took a critical political position. In his most recent book, entitled *Thughur al-Murabata* (Posts of Resistance),<sup>230</sup> he reveals his positions about political violence. He removes any trappings of philosophy and engages directly in ideological and political criticism.<sup>231</sup> These positions have been further clarified in the stances he has taken regarding certain political organizations in the Middle East, as well as some stances that seem very close to those of some “jihadist” Islamist movements. This was simply not present in most of Taha Abdurrahman’s earlier positions, at least before the Arab Spring.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> As a result of these criticisms of Sufi religiosity, he himself became critical of the order that he belonged to. Since he wanted to distance himself from Sufi institutions, he adopted the idea of individual Sufism in his scholarly work.

<sup>230</sup> Taha ‘Abdurrahman, *Thughur al-Murabata: Muqaraba l’timaniyya li-Sira’at al-Umma al-Haliyya*, Mansurat Markaz Magharib, first edition, Rabat, 2018.

<sup>231</sup> Scholars of Taha ‘Abdurrahman, expecting this work to also draw on Sufi referents, note that this book “may surprise many who have followed Taha ‘Abdurrahman’s work for a long time and consider him to be a philosopher rooted in Islamic Arabic knowledge. However this close socio-cultural reading does not disguise his philosophical dissimulation, because sociological-cultural analyses do not easily lend themselves to the kind of discourse that conceals more than it reveals.” Furthermore, it seems that “Taha ‘Abdurrahman wanted to reveal his political agenda, which was quite transparent even through his philosophical language. It is clear that he is headed methodologically in the direction of esoteric (*irfani*) knowledge, but also towards a kind of political awakening.” Idris Jandari, on Taha ‘Abdurrahman’s book *Thughur al-Murabata*, review posted on the website *al-Majalla al-Thaqafiyya*, 20 December 2018, <https://thakafamag.com/?p=19449>

<sup>232</sup> An exception to this is the book *Al-Haqq al-‘Arabi fi al-Ikhtilaf al-Falsafi* (2002) as well as *al-Haqq al-‘Arabi fi al-Ikhtilaf al-Fikri* (2005) because they were both published in solidarity with various critical political stances against Western politicians, as well as in the book *al-Hadatha wa-l-Maqawama* (2007) which defended Hezbollah.

Although there are other consequences for Sufism, which come from internal sources, unlike the previously mentioned critiques coming from sources external to Sufism. This includes those writers who draw upon ideological Islamist sources, or other ideological, materialist sources, which relates to our next point.

## 2) Implications Within Sufism: The Call for a “Post-*tariqa*” Sufism

The phenomenon of “post-“ ideologies, which was global at first and then later emerged in the Arab world, has produced many different forms: “post-secularism,” “post-modernism,” “post-Islamism” and “post-Salafism,” to name a few.<sup>233</sup> The idea of a “post-*tariqa*” Sufism in the region emerged most clearly directly after the Arab Spring. This particular phenomenon of “post-*tariqa*” Sufism was really present before that moment in time, but in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring,” the discourse became significantly more prominent.

To be clear, we are not talking about a “post-mysticism” more generally. Islamic mysticism has ancient roots, and there are also followers of Abrahamic religions who are mystics as well as in other non-Abrahamic faiths. Since we are concerned here with Islamic Sunni mysticism—Sufism—we are not addressing Jewish, Christian, or even Shi’i mysticism.<sup>234</sup>

It is during the last ten years especially that this thesis of “post-*tariqa*” Sufism has emerged. Éric Geoffroy, the Muslim French scholar, has addressed the question of Sufi religiosity in Europe, and became particularly known for his book entitled *L’Islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> This existential uncertainty even extended to some Western writers concerned with issues such as “post-humanism.”

<sup>234</sup> We say this taking into account that there are also similarities and differences among these different forms of Sufi religiosity.

<sup>235</sup> Eric Geoffroy, *Al-Mustaqbal li-l-Islam al-Ruhani*, trans. Hashim Saleh, al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Tarjama, Cairo, first edition, 2016. For the original French, see Eric Geoffroy, *L’Islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2016.

In the Moroccan sphere, and specifically in the Sufi religious sphere in Morocco, some religious scholars, particularly those who specialize in Sufism, have made this choice in one way or another. However, because of the enormous sensitivity of talking about “post-*tariqa* Sufism” in the so-called “land of the saints,” these figures have not necessarily broadcast their views explicitly. They continue to defend Sufi discourse both in theory and practice through their scholarly works, but without belonging to the institution of a Sufi order. There is a group of critical essays published by Abu Ya’rub al-Marzouki which deal with Sufi religiosity and the turmoil caused by the *tariqa* phenomenon.<sup>236</sup> One essay warns that “Sunni Sufism was not supposed to lead to *туруқија* (a system of orders), as the soul (*nafs*) of the external state of Islam, or to be an alternative to the state [especially given that it brings together] the *batin* (internal) and the philosophical (external) on the practical level.”<sup>237</sup>

The key point here is that for most followers of Sufi orders, this is a question that doesn’t seem to require further thought: why talk at all about “post-*tariqa* Sufism”? What prompted Eric Geoffroy in France, and some Moroccan scholars, to discuss this idea of “post-*tariqa* Sufism” as an option? Were they really drawing from Sufism, and defending it in the face of aberrant forms that were distorting Islam more generally, especially in Islamism, such as that issuing from the Islamist “jihadists”?

It is clear that we are talking here about ills that are generally kept silent, but which affect Sufism in its *tariqa*-centered form, that

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<sup>236</sup> There is a tendency among some scholars to reduce Sufism to its *zawiyas*. Sufi orders (*туруқ*) should be considered one of many historical elements that make up Sufism. Therefore all the different facets of Sufism—from *ma’rifā* to *dhawq* to *ufuq*— cannot be reduced to “*туруқи*” Sufism. This is not to minimize the historical role of *туруқи* Sufism, including its role in confronting political, religious, and social strife, as we have observed during several moments in the Moroccan context.

<sup>237</sup> Abu Ya’rub al-Marzouki, *Dawr al-Falsafa al-Naqdiyya al-‘Arabiyya wa-Munjazatuha*, Beirut: al-Shabka al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, first edition, 2012, p. 196.

is, in Sufi orders. This is the case in many Islamic countries, such as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, Sudan, Egypt, and many others.

We can consider other challenges here, including those which plague the Islamic movements. However, what has concerned scholars, including Islamist scholars, are the aberrations that Islamist religiosity has witnessed in Morocco and in the region. It has become clear that these deviations and transformations will also affect Sufi religiosity, which brings us to the theoretical and practical predicament into which various Sufi orders in Egypt have fallen. There is also the matter of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, which went as far as to issue membership cards for Sufi institutions. Sufism had a more individual character during the second and third centuries AH, and then in the sixth and seventh centuries AH became organized into institutions—but it has never been structured around membership cards.

It became clear that Moroccan Sufism was facing various forms of *suluki* upheaval, which opened the doors to scholarly analysis of these challenges, and conferences and workshops were organized to address the challenges that Sufi discourse was facing in Morocco today. Some of the organizers of these conferences drew upon Sufi authorities, so perhaps it can be said that they were indirectly acknowledging the shifts that Sufi religiosity is witnessing in Morocco today.

In dealing with the implications and transformations that Moroccan Sufism has gone through during recent decades, including after the Arab Spring, there has been indirect engagement with the political arena, as well as the emergence of this strand of thought that wants to build a “post-*tariqa* Sufism.” In sum, Moroccan Sufism is facing at least three main challenges: challenges dealing with the essence of Sufism, other adjacent challenges, and challenges coming from further afield.

- In the first case, we must take into account the particularities of Sufi religiosity, which is based on purification (*tazkiya*), that is, to synthesize the essence, and to face the “second enemy” of the self, which is the love of the self. The temptation



of utilizing Sufism for personal, ideological or political considerations is among the most significant challenges that the essence of Sufism is facing<sup>238</sup> in dealing with the [worldly fortunes of] the self. The challenge here lies in yielding to these temptations, and the material reality of the Moroccan situation.

- Regarding adjacent challenges, by which we mean the challenges that are connected to religious discourse in general, whether as a religious sermon produced by a religious institution or Islamist ideological project, a religio-political discourse, or militant “jihadist” religious discourses. These oppositional discourses emanate from Islamist movements and criticize or minimize Sufism.

- Finally, it is difficult to determine the scope of the various challenges that Sufism faces from further afield. We are referring here to the general challenges that humanity is facing as whole, such as the humanist tendencies of Islam, in which the Seal of the Prophet brought mercy to both this world and the next. There are at least three challenges Sufism faces in this field, among a long list of challenges: materialist philosophies, which are ultimately anti-humanist, capitalism which is entirely anti-humanist,<sup>239</sup> and digital religions that are opposed to Abrahamic faiths—regardless of what each might claim.

## Conclusion

This study has focused on the various transformations that Moroccan Sufism has witnessed in recent decades, and which became

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<sup>238</sup> For some of the most recent works that have examined the present and the future horizons of Sufi discourse today, see: Abd al-Hakim Ajhar, *al-Haqiqa wa-Sultat al-Ikhtilaf: al-Tasawwuf bi-wasfihi Ijaba Ukhra ‘an al-Su’al al-Islami*, Beirut and Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi li-l-Kitab, first edition, 2019, p. 259.

<sup>239</sup> The coronavirus pandemic that began at the end of 2019, and which seems to be lasting for months, is yet another practical and theoretical moment in this series of more global challenges that Sufi discourse and religious discourse as a whole face.

clearer after the Arab Spring. The events of 2011 had many consequences for the essence of Sufism, including the spread of a “*post-tariqa*” Sufi discourse, alongside other challenges from outside the core of Sufism. The most important of these is the flurry of criticism that has been directed towards Sufi involvement in the political arena, since it is known that Sufism has kept its distance from politics for centuries. There are various other challenges that have emerged, some of which we have mentioned in the fourth section of this study.

It is clear that the challenges that humanity faces together extend to all Muslims, and that Sufi religiosity is concerned with these questions about the theoretical essence of Sufism, and about the nature of the theoretical keys that may help Muslims and non-Muslims in unlocking some of the challenges that have been mentioned.

Sufis have become aware of these challenges, and this awareness will help Sufism, as well as the societies and countries of the region, which still contains a significant Sufi presence.

We need to depend on Sufism to achieve these legitimate ambitions, as has been previously mentioned. We need to take into account that Sufism in the region is not only Sufi orders, but rather patterns of religiosity interwoven with other complex social, religious, and cultural factors that we cannot reduce to a political decision to counter certain religious and materialist ideologies. This is a choice from which we cannot turn back, because in our current reality, Sufism still needs further reform and rehabilitation, for the sake of its own adherents as much as for Morocco’s leaders.



## THE LANDSCAPE OF SUFISM IN SENEGAL

*Dr. Mouhamed El Moctar Dieye*

Senegal has known Sufism and Sufi orders since Islam reached the country during the dynasty of the Almoravids, who established *ribats* (Sufi monasteries) and *zawiyas* on the banks of the Senegal River. Sufism was the most powerful current among the various Islamic creeds and *madhabs* which entered Senegal. It spread widely within the country, becoming a spiritual wellspring which eventually extended to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa.

The framework of Sufism and its *hadras* and *murids* gave rise to activities relating to religion, culture, and the religious sciences, as well as calls for reform. Furthermore, as a result of Sufism, *mahdars* (gathering places), madrasas, institutes, universities, and centers of knowledge spread their influence on the continent. Within Senegal, particular Sufi groups and affiliations have emerged. New social patterns and structures arose which had and continue to have a profound impact on the country's Muslim community. Thus, Islam in Senegal took on a Sufi or *tariqa*-based character. There is a near-consensus among Senegalese people that affiliating with a Sufi *tariqa* is necessary, and that an individual is not Muslim unless he is connected with a Sufi shaykh to guide him or help his soul ascend (*tarqiyya*). This is in accordance with the Sufi saying, "He who doesn't have a shaykh has Satan as his shaykh."

Sufism has played an important role in Senegal which is characterized by cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions. Before examining these dimensions, it is necessary to discuss Sufism itself and its most significant *tariqas* in Senegal.

## I. An overview of Sufism and its most important *tariqas* in Senegal

The majority (95%) of the Senegalese people are Muslim, and virtually all Senegalese Muslims are affiliated with *tariqas*. As we have indicated, in Senegal it is unimaginable for a person to be Muslim without adhering to a *tariqa* or affiliating with a Sufi shaykh. One researcher has observed that in several ways, Sufi *tariqas* inadvertently converged with the African tribal structure, considering that they replaced pre-Islamic pagan groups in the country.<sup>240</sup>

Since Islam reached Senegal, *tariqas* have been a part of the the country's Muslim community. Examples include the Qadiri, Tijani, and Mouride orders, which are detailed below.

**1. The Qadiri order:** the oldest *tariqa* not only in Senegal, but in all of West Africa. Many scholars believe that the Qadiri order entered West Africa by way of migrants from Tuat. After founding the first center for their *tariqa*, the migrants fled to Timbuktu, then making their way to Senegal.<sup>241</sup>

**2. The Tijani order:** One of the most significant *tariqas* in Senegal, it reached the country by way of Mauritania. However, this *tariqa*'s spread in Senegal and sub-Saharan Africa is due to the Senegalese shaykh al-Hajj Omar al-Futi Tal. Several branches have stemmed from the Tijani order in Senegal, most notably the following:

- The Tivaouane branch, led by al-Hajj Malick Sy.
- The Kaolack branch, led by al-Hajj Abdullah Niasse
- The Tiénaba branch, led by Amary Ndack Seck

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<sup>240</sup> Deschamps, Hubert. (1986). *Al-Diyanat fi Ifriqiya al-Sawda'*. Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Masriyya. p. 189.

<sup>241</sup> Dieye, Mouhamed El Moctar. (2008). "Al-Fikr al-Sufi 'ind al-Shaykhayn Ahmad Bamba wa-l-Hajj Malik Sy" (doctoral dissertation). Tunis: University of Ez-Zitouna. p. 54.

**3. The Mouride order:** This local *tariqa* was founded by the Senegalese shaykh Amadou Bamba following his experiences with Sufism and his reaching what he called the divine presence (*al-hadra al-ilahiyya*). Today, the Mouride order is one of the most prominent and significant *tariqas* in Senegal in terms of its economic and social heft. Compared to other *tariqas*, the Mouride order has the advantage of being well-organized and disciplined: there is one general *khalifa* (spiritual successor), and all members of the *tariqa* heed his orders.<sup>242</sup>

## II. The impact of Sufism and Sufi orders on Senegalese society

Sufism and Sufi orders took root in Senegal and carried the banner of Islam since first reaching the country. As a result, Sufism came to play a significant role in all aspects of Senegalese society: social, cultural, economic, and political.

**1. Sufism and the social dimension:** Sufism is a religious and moral phenomenon as well as a social one. It is a set of values which are realized by communities and social and moral functions. In Senegal, the roles of Sufism reach beyond the religious dimension into political and social dimensions, thus safeguarding and “immunizing” society against extremism and terrorism. Sufism provides a positive model for action, tolerance, and solidarity among the members of a given *tariqa*. Sufi orders are intertwined with Senegal’s social fabric and social infrastructure. The functions performed by *hadras* and Sufi leadership overlap with the various roles of the state and functions of civic society.

Sufi orders in Senegal established a Shari’a judiciary and a system of tight regulation for their organizations. They forged lasting relationships with members of Senegalese society such that the public turns to them to solve social and religious problems.

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<sup>242</sup> Sila, Abdul Qadir Muhammad. (1986/1406). *Al-Muslimun fi al-Sinighal Ma’alim al-Hadir w-’Afaq al-Mustaqbal* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Qatar: Kitab al-Umma. p. 140.

Within the framework of religious circles or organizations, the Sufi *khalifa* or leader and his representatives fulfill important social roles. In the view of the public, they are at least as important as the tribal chief and his assistants. They officiate weddings and name children at the *'aqiqa* (Islamic tradition of sacrificing an animal on the occasion of a child's birth). They settle conflicts or disputes between different factions in society. This is especially the case in towns and rural areas, where people prefer to turn to Sufi leadership rather than litigating in a courtroom. Thus, Sufism has a very significant influence on the social dimension. Some Sufi leaders control even the smallest details of the lives of their followers.

Another aspect of the social dimensions of Sufism is social services and charitable work. Thousands of Senegalese families depend upon support and assistance from shaykhs of the *tariqas*, who pay for their costs of living and sometimes even the cost of educating their children.

The social services and charitable work performed by the leaders of some *tariqas* cover a variety of other social dimensions, such as the following:

- Spending money to help the poor and the less fortunate. Thousands of impoverished families and *murids* live in the halls of Sufi meeting places (*hadras*) and in the homes of Sufis.
- Organize religious ceremonies during the month of Ramadan and the Islamic holidays. Shaykhs of the major Sufi orders distribute clothes and sacrificial food to a number of poor followers and *murids*.
- Resolving issues faced by followers and *murids*, such as debt issues and lobbying for the release of prisoners.
- Joining followers and *murids* for social occasions such as marriage, *'aqiqas*, funerals, etc.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Salim, Mohammed. "Al-'Ab'ad al-Ijtima'iyya li-l-Tasawwuf fi al-Gharb al-'Ifriqi." Markaz al-Jazira li-l-Dirasat. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/reports/2018/09/180926110001736.html>

**2. Sufism and the cultural dimension:** Sufism plays an essential role in spreading the Arabic language and Islamic culture in Senegal. In particular, Sufi orders have served as a crucial vessel for the Arabic language. The shaykhs of Sufi orders used education and teaching as a means for proselytizing and propagating Islam in different parts of Senegal. These shaykhs founded madrasas, *kuttabs* (elementary Qur'anic schools), and institutes for Qur'anic memorization and for instruction of Shari'a and philological sciences. They also prepared their children and followers to continue this work.

In Senegal, the most significant institutes and foundations for religious education are connected with Sufism. For example, the al-Azhar madrasas, affiliated with the Mouride *tariqa*, were founded by Shaykh Muhammad Murtada. These madrasas comprise one of the largest and most influential platforms for education and learning in Senegal. They are distributed throughout the country, and thousands of Senegalese have graduated from them. Al-Azhar is currently working to build a high-quality Islamic university.

Meanwhile, in the Tijani order, sheikhs have helped to establish madrasas, *mahdars* focused on religious knowledge, and scholarly and educational institutions. Shaykh al-Hajj Malick Sy, the leader of the Tijani *tariqa* in the city of Tivaouane, founded a number of *zawiyas* in various parts of Senegal at which to train and educate his followers and *murids*.<sup>244</sup> Likewise, al-Hajj Abdullah Niasse Institute, founded by Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse al-Kawlakhi of the Tijani order, is one of the most important and longest-standing educational institutions in Senegal. It has produced thousands of graduates who are well-versed in Arabo-Islamic culture. Shaykh Ibrahim Niasse played a significant role in the spread of the Tijani order, particularly in the countries neighboring Senegal such as Gambia, Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, etc.<sup>245</sup> Also, the shaykh's brother, Shaykh Muhammad al-Khalifa Niasse, was one of Senegal's major writers and poets in the Arabic language.

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<sup>244</sup> Sar, Abdulkarim. (1986). *Al-Tarikh li-l-Islam fi al-Sinighal* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Masriyya. p. 102.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid. p. 135.



Sufi *tariqas* also made cultural contributions in the form of prolific literary and scholarly output. This includes scholarly writings and works on grammar, literature, religion, ethics, Sufism, and *madh* (panegyric) for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Sufi literature in Senegal, with its various topics, accounts for the majority of the country's Arabic-language literature. Sufi shaykhs excelled at crafting *qa-sidas* in praise of the Prophet (PBUH) and in praise of their shaykhs.

Other art forms included calligraphy and painting. The celebrations held by Sufi orders served as festivals open to many art forms, such as song, dance, and traditional folklore.

**3. Sufism and the economic dimension:** Sufism is a social phenomenon with a robust economic dimension, as seen in the case of Senegal. Sufi leaders in the country played a major role in economic development, especially in the farming and agriculture sector, which is the foundation of the Senegalese economy. Thus, this is the broadest area in which Sufi orders are active.

Sufi leaders took an interest in agricultural economics and founded large agricultural towns. They assembled their followers and *murids* in these areas and used them to exploit large fields of peanuts and various grains. Followers and *murids* also raised livestock in exchange for education.<sup>246</sup>

One researcher points to the fact that the development and growth of peanut farming significantly raised the profile of Sufi shaykhs, and that Sufi leadership did not hesitate to take advantage of this economic weight. Thus, they amassed increasing power and influence, and their role in the sociopolitical arena expanded.<sup>247</sup>

Sufi shaykhs also showed great interest in trade, and religious festivals fulfilled an important commercial function. Traders from large cities brought goods and wares that were much-needed in villages and rural areas, such as foodstuffs and clothes. In addition, pa-

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<sup>246</sup> Marty, Paul. (1917). *Etudes sur l'Islam au Senegal* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Paris. p. 220.

<sup>247</sup> "Tuba Tahkum al-Sinighal bi-l-Mal wa-l-'Atba". Al-Jazira Net. 13 May 2010. Accessed on 30 August 2018: <https://tinyurl.com/y27t8vnk>

parallel markets began to move, and Sufi sights and festival activities were accompanied by wide-ranging economic activity. For example, each year, during the festival of glorification held on the anniversary of the exile of Shaykh Amadou Bamba, the city of Touba transforms from the Mouride order's "capital" into a large, international exhibition. The festival attracts more than three million visitors, who seek blessings at the *maqam* of the shaykh who founded the *tariqa*.<sup>248</sup>

Sufi religious festivals drive various types of trade and economic activity. The same is true in terms of broader economic dimensions in other Sufi cities and capitals such as Tivaouane, the home of the Tijani-Malicki *hadra*; Kaolack, the home of the Tijani-Ibrahimi *tariqa*; the city of Gonasse; and others. Sufism in Senegal has significant economic clout, and its religious activities take on an economic, commercial character. Among the followers of Sufism are Senegal's wealthy classes, who support and fund the projects of their Sufi shaykhs through gifts. These gifts acquire a notable religious dimension and are a source of happiness for the *murids*. Shaykh Amadou Bamba, the founder of the Mouride order in Senegal, said:

*Blessed are the faithful murid servants – they have service, love and guidance*

Generally, Sufism in Senegal is characterized by positive action and service. It follows that Sufi shaykhs take an interest in work, agriculture, and trade. One Senegalese scholar notes that the economic dimension has dominated the activities of officials in some *tariqas*, to the extent that they lose sight of the essential aspects of life in the *tariqa*. That is, some officials have become businessmen and traders in shaykhs' robes.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Al-Mouctar, Mouhamed. *Ibid.* p. 125.

<sup>249</sup> Mbacké, Khadim Mouhamed Sa'id. (2002). *Al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi al-Sinighal*. Rabat: Ma'had al-Dirasat al-'Ifriqiyya. p. 114.

### III. Conclusion

Senegalese society has known Sufism since Islam arrived to the country. However, since the eighteenth century AD, Sufism has proliferated in the form of Sufi orders. These *tariqas* have experienced a major resurgence, and Sufism has become deeply intertwined with the country's history and its social and cultural traditions. Most Senegalese cannot imagine a person being Muslim without being affiliated with a Sufi order. Some of the most significant *tariqas* in Senegal are the Qadiri, Tijani, and Mouride orders. The shaykhs of these *tariqas* have seen their star rise and have come to wield significant influence in all dimensions of society: cultural, social, and political.

Sufism played a key role in the integration of different communities in Senegal. It broke through tribal and regional barriers in a fervent attempt to achieve national, public inclusiveness. Sufism has also contributed to economic development and prosperity in the sector of agriculture and peanut production.

It contributed to the founding of a number of cities, after which it helped them to thrive and become economic hubs bustling with commercial activity. Examples include the city of Touba and – in terms of cultural activity – Tivaouane. Sufism played a considerable role in education and in the founding of scholarly and cultural centers which have graduated thousands of Senegalese. Additionally, some Sufi leaders left behind a prolific literary output which enriched Arabo-Islamic heritage.

The Sufi movement in Senegal experienced major growth and expansion by attracting the majority of Senegalese people, who see it as the solution for many psychological, spiritual, and social issues. Accordingly, Sufism in Senegal continues to have a prosperous outlook due to its organizations, its association with holiness, and its ability to renew its methods and activities.

## THE STORY OF SUFISM IN BOSNIA

*Mariam Tulic*

You approach an old building, built over five centuries ago. It is rather unremarkable from the outside, yet you are intrigued by the commotion at the entrance and you decide to enter and explore the matter further. Upon entering, you are surprised to find the walls covered in Arabic text and prayers in a mix of languages unfolding in front of you. Perhaps from this medley you distinguish the repetition of prayers for the Prophet Muhammad and invocations to God in Arabic, and the recitation of an Arabic poem that goes,

*Say, O Great one, You are the Mighty One  
Our minds have been filled with a grave concern  
But every worry that caused us distress  
Eases away in Your name, O Magnificent one.*

You stroll further inside, and you are charmed by the sight of a large circle of mostly young men donning white shirts and dark green vests, immersed in supplications to the rhythm of slight shakes of the head from right to left. It is a purely Oriental picture at odds with the clearly Western appearance of the building's exterior. You are not surprised to notice women participating in a *dhikr* circle on their own side.

You explore the space with your eyes, the color red scattered densely throughout, swords hung on a wall to the side, as well as fezzes and dervish cloaks, and the exclamations “*Ya Allah*” and “*Ya hu*” inscribed on more than one wall. Circular symbols fill the surfaces, from reliefs to the rugs at the center of the *dhikr* circle, to paintings and others. So many symbols.

Welcome to the *tekija*.

Is this a common scene in Bosnia? Certainly not. But its prevalence has seen ebbs and flows over the course of decades and centuries.

The status of Sufism oscillates between different gravitational pulls. In most cases, its fortunes have been dictated by the reality of the victor, as well as the reality of a small state mired in cultural strife. It has been caught between a regional context that is Christian and identifies with Western civilization, and an Islamic history and affiliation that the people of the country value and are motivated to preserve. It has been caught between the norms of Western civilization on one side, and brittle political and economic conditions on the other. In the end, all of these factors play a role in either broadening or constricting the influence of Sufism within Muslim Bosnian society.

You are led by the title “Sufism in Bosnia.” You search for it in the folds of religious life, and it quickly emerges from many parts: in rituals of religious celebration, in the sermons of preachers and shaykhs, even in the manner of worship.

You turn to culture, and you quickly encounter solid examples that give you an idea of the extent of Sufism’s penetration and traces in society. The old libraries hold a great number of Sufi manuscripts, and the verses of Bosnia’s poets, old and new, abound with hints of Sufism and mentions of dervishes.

You move on to politics, thinking it to be a sphere far out of the scope of Sufism, and yet you come across examples that convince you that Sufism is in fact deeply entrenched. There is no escaping the manifestations of Sufi influence on all things Bosniak. So finally you decide to better understand the situation, to delve deeper in order to know where, how, and why Sufism became one of the keys to understanding contemporary Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## Early History

Historians say that the Isa-Beg Ishaković *tekija* (pl. *tekije*, places of Sufi gathering) was the first to be built in Sarajevo after the arrival of the Ottomans, deriving its name from the first Ottoman gov-

ernor of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was built prior to 1463, and the city quickly developed around the *tekija* and the rest of the buildings that Isa-Beg Ishaković erected, including the *saray* (Ottoman palace) from which Sarajevo derived its name.

The number of Bosnian converts to Islam grew progressively over the next two centuries, and after 150 years, a third of Bosnia's population was Muslim. In many cases, conversion was accompanied by membership in a Sufi order, as evidenced by the rapid increase in number of *tekije*. In his mid-17<sup>th</sup> century account of Sarajevo, the explorer Evliya Çelebi counted a total of 47 *tekije* in the city. A second indication of the popularity of Sufism is the Bosnian people's interest in the collection, study, and compilation of Sufi books, to the extent that they came to represent a plurality of all manuscripts in public and private libraries. The *tekije*, too, were crowded with Sufi books and manuscripts: in the Sinan Pasha *tekija*, for example, there were 222 manuscripts. The oldest manuscript in the Gazi Husrev-beg Library – “the Greatest of the Ottoman Libraries” – was a copy of the book *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali dating to the year 1131 AD, a mere 20 years after the death of its author, making it one of the oldest transcribed books in the world. Sufi poems of divine love also circulated widely and had a significant impact on local inhabitants, Muslim and non-Muslim alike.<sup>250</sup>

There are numerous explanations for why Sufism took root in the Bosniak context. Some ascribe a pivotal role to the dervishes in proselytizing for Islam among Bosniaks, especially in remote regions. Bosnia's scholars would also travel to Istanbul to study and it is inevitable that the knowledge they then transmitted to their students and followers reflected a certain Sufi-steeped Turkish influence. Then there is the role of the religious endowments (*awqaf*) of charitable benefactors and the local governors, some of whom endowed the establishment of *tekije* and accompanying amenities, making financial support for Sufism widely available. The Ottoman state also recognized Sufi orders, which had sway in the Ottoman court, as the sultans, as well as their governors and ministers, depended on the bless-

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<sup>250</sup> <https://cutt.us/7HeLn>

ing of their shaykhs and the support of their followers for influence.<sup>251</sup>

There is also an explanation that links the strong spread of Sufism in the countryside to the Bogomil beliefs that were dominant in Bosnia and Herzegovina before the arrival of Islam. Bogomilism is a Christian sect considered heretical by the Vatican because of its dualist teachings and its denial that Jesus was the son of God, among other beliefs and practices that distinguished the inhabitants of Bosnia from their Serbian Orthodox and Croatian Catholic neighbors. Among the evidence to support the view that the spread of Sufism was linked to the Bogomil religion is that Bogomil religious practice would take place in open air and in caves and these very same places were subsequently turned into *tekije* and *zawaya*. In fact, some of them retained their sacred symbolism and turned into a common space of religiosity where dervishes, the needy, and the pious would come to practice their *dhikr*, blessings, and supplications, and others would come out of force of habit or even others still for a simple stroll or to shop in the open air markets that would be set up. To this day, there is even a special place to which people go to perform prayers and supplications for rain at specific times of the year; there is no doubt that this ritual has pagan roots that perhaps even precede Bogomilism. Lastly, there is a popular tale that tells of the last Bogomil priest surrendering his sacred staff to the shaykh of the Mevlevi order, as a way of recognizing and welcoming the new religion. It is said that the staff was safeguarded in the Mevlevi *tekija* in the Bentbaša area of Sarajevo until it was demolished, from which time there has been no more trace of the staff. In his history of Bosnia, the historian Noel Malcom justifies this relationship between Sufism and pre-Islamic religion, arguing that “the transition from popular Christianity to

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<sup>251</sup> “Sufiyyat al-Bosna wa-l-Harsik: al-Qadizadiyya wa-l-Hamzawiyya – Dirasa ‘Aqdiyya,” Subhja bent Jusuf Ljakić. Masters’ thesis, specialization in contemporary creed and *madhahib*, King Saud University, p. 37, 32, 35.  
[http://aqeeda.org/book/sofiya\\_bosnia.pdf](http://aqeeda.org/book/sofiya_bosnia.pdf)

popular Islam is not difficult, and so it is possible to have continuity in practices under different names.”<sup>252</sup>

### **A Long and Arduous Period for Sufism and the Dervishes**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a crisis of modernity began among Bosnia’s Muslims, who started to emit doubts with regard to Sufism. A group of reformers and scholars emerged who attacked Sufism, its rituals, and the popular practices with which it was associated, accusing them of being backward. It appears that this inclination spread especially among Muslims who were educated in the West and sought to advance the position of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina during a difficult period in which first rose the calls of chauvinist nationalism, and then of communism. At the same time, the Islamic Community (official religious organization of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and foremost Islamic authority in the Balkans) saw the rise of Muslim scholars who studied at al-Azhar and were influenced by the thought of Muhammad ‘Abduh and Rashid Rida. They attacked Sufism and the Sufi orders, which they considered to not represent the truth of Pure Islam. They attempted by way of their writings and lectures to focus attention on a return to the fundamentals – the Qur’an and sunna – and called on people to renounce traditional understandings of Islam that were rife with nonsense and non-Islamic influences.

One such figure was Husein Džozo, who studied Shari‘a in al-Azhar and was one of the greatest scholars in Bosnia from the Second World War until the 1980s. He wrote of the matter: “The many concessions that official Islamic thought has granted to popular beliefs and customs are clear. Processions up to heights and caves, a pre-Islamic practice that is either the remnant of the popular Slavic pagan ceremonies of the spring and summer or the distant echo of the Catholic procession, are dressed in Islamic clothes. The performance of ritual duties, *dhikr*, celebrations of saints, etc. are loaded with pop-

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<sup>252</sup> Noel Malcolm, *Tarikh al-Bosna*, trans. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Jawid, al-Hay’a al-Misriyya li-l-Kitab, 1997, p.92.

<https://www.dopdfwn.com/cacnretra/scgdfnuya/Alkottob-LS88B.pdf>



ular practice.”<sup>253</sup> The late president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the intellectual Alija Izetbegović, who was member of the Bosnian Young Muslims (an organization that represented educated young Muslim elites in the late 1930s and early 1940s) said that “the unity of Islam disintegrated at the hands of people who reduced it to its mere religious dimension, thus abandoning the unity that was Islam’s particularity and what differentiated it from the other religions. They reduced Islam to a mere religion, or to mysticism, and the situation of Muslims deteriorated. That is because when the zeal of the Muslims is weakened, when they neglect their role in this world, when they refrain from interacting with it, then the Islamic state becomes like any other state. The state becomes a bare force that does not serve anyone but itself. The atheistic kings and scholars, the squads of dervishes, and Sufism all represent the outward face of this internal disintegration that has afflicted Islam, and thus we return to the Christian formula ‘render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.’ Sufi philosophy represents one of the worst manners of deviance, which we can call the ‘Christianization of Islam,’ in that it is a retrogression in Islam from the word of Muhammad, blessings of God and peace be upon him, to that of Jesus, peace be upon him.”<sup>254</sup>

After the Second World War, the Communists came to power under the leadership of Tito, and Bosnia and Herzegovina became one of the constituent republics of Yugoslavia. The Communist government subsequently decided to bar anything that conflicted with the official method of instruction. It published a law that banned women from wearing the hijab in 1950, and in the same year it came down with a decision to shut down the last of the schools for Qur’anic memorization. The teaching of children in mosques was considered a crime punished by law and Sufi orders were also considered to be a means of influence that violated the regime and clashed with its communist orientations. The Islamic Community, moreover, was

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<sup>253</sup> Dr. Muhammad al-Arna’ut, *al-Bosna wa-l-Harsik khilal al-Hukm al-Uthmani*, Dar al-‘An Nashirun, Amman, 2019, p.271; See also: <https://cutt.us/gl5px>.

<sup>254</sup> *Al-Islam bayn al-Sharq wa-l-Gharb*, Alija Izetbegović, trans. Muhammad Yusuf ‘Adas, first edition 1994, Majallat al-Nur al-Kuwaytiyya and Mu’assasat Bavaria li-l-Nashr wa-l-‘Ilam wa-l-Khadamat (Bavaria Verlag & Handel GmbH), p.287.

dominated at the time by intellectuals with communist inclinations, and it issued a decision in 1952 to close all of the *tekije* present on Bosnian territory and prohibit all dervish orders, as well as traditional religious ceremonial practices, such as visiting sacred shrines. Some of these measures were met with covert opposition, such that Islamic texts remained in circulation, children continued to receive education in mosques, and the Sufi dervish orders continued to practice their religious ceremonies in private homes.<sup>255</sup>

### Sufism in the Present Time

The end of the 1970s saw the rise of religious inclinations in the former Yugoslavia, and Bosnia was no exception. Some scholars and friends of the Sufi orders began calling for the revival of the *tekije*, and some Sufi orders cautiously began practicing their religious ceremonies.

The coalition of Sufi movements SIDRA was established in 1971 and at the time it was not recognized by the Islamic Community, but by 1977 a form of rapprochement took place between the entities that resembled recognition. Then came the abrogation of the prohibition on *tekije* by the parliament of Yugoslavia in 1989, and the Center of Sufi Orders (*Tarikatski Centar*) was quickly established to oversee the *tekije*. The Center began operating legally as a non-governmental organization under the umbrella of the Islamic Community all while preserving its autonomy.

Sufism came once again in public view in the 1990s through its participation in the war, and its entrance into, and interaction with politics, whether through the existing political parties or various cultural and social organizations. The declaration of Bosnia and Herzegovina's independence and its international recognition was followed by the emergence of Serbian militias cooperating with the former Yugoslavian army on Bosnian territory. The militias targeted anything affiliated with the cultural and religious presence of Bosniak Muslims, destroying mosques and minarets throughout most of the

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<sup>255</sup> <http://makdizdar.ba/sufizam-u-bosni-i-hercegovini/>

territory that they captured. They targeted historic libraries that contained treasures of Eastern manuscripts of the Bosnian language written in Arabic script (aljamiado transcription) as well as Arabic, Turkish, and Persian. *Tekije* and sacred tombs were also targeted: five *tekije* and seven sacred tombs were destroyed, and four *tekije* and 37 tombs were desecrated. At the same time, the bloody days of the conflict saw Sufi orders join in the fighting, as they actively participated in the establishment of the Muslim brigade within the Bosnian army from which emerged leaders who would attain wide popularity like Halil Brzina Efendi.<sup>256</sup>

The war (April 1992 – December 1995) also witnessed the active participation of Arab fighters who were referred to as “mujahidin,” as well as the participation of philanthropic organizations from the Gulf states, among others, in relief campaigns for civilians and refugees. This activity helped establish a foothold for the spread of Salafist ideas that oppose Sufi thought and accuse popular religiosity of containing many myths, innovations, and idolatries. This led to positionings, rejoinders, and contentious debates within the religious community and among writers and intellectuals. There is no doubt that domestic political developments like privatization, the rise of unemployment, economic decline, mass emigration, and the separatist tendencies of Bosnia’s Serbs and Croats that threatened the country’s fragmentation, contributed to the situation in some way. Other developments around the world also played a role, like the events of September 11, 2001 which led to the shuttering of Saudi charitable organizations, or the rise of ISIS, in which a number of young Bosnians enlisted, as well as that of Erdogan’s Turkey.

On the other hand, all of these events and more contributed to the crystallization of a moderate type of Bosnian Islam that has no objection to Sufi practices and considers them an authentic part of Islamic heritage, attempting to firmly establish it and seeing in it the spirit of the times. And let us not forget the role of globalization in this regard, which helped spread publications and books on Islamic law, thus increasing knowledge of Islam’s legal provisions, especially

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<sup>256</sup> [https://ibn-sina.net/images/pdf/znakovi/26\\_27/192\\_HUSEYIN\\_ABIVA.pdf](https://ibn-sina.net/images/pdf/znakovi/26_27/192_HUSEYIN_ABIVA.pdf)

among the generations that came of age after communist rule. As a result, they were able to distinguish between religious rituals and traditions. At an official level, the Islamic Community also sponsors Sufi celebrations, conferences, and other events, and some locations linked to Sufism have become tourist destinations like the Blagaj *teki-ja* on the Buna river.<sup>257</sup>

## Bosnia's Most Renowned Sufi Orders

It must first be said that there were orders that were widespread in Bosnia but which have since become extinct, such as the Khalwatiyya, the Bayramiyya, the Malamiyya, and the Sa'adiyya. There are also some orders that have a small presence but wield disproportionate influence, like the Mevlevi order. Then there are some more recent orders that have emerged as branches of older orders, most of which arrived from Turkey, like the Khalidiyya, the Sulaymaniyya, and the followers of Said Nursi. As for the differences between the orders, there is a famous saying that clarifies the variance between the followers of each: "Those who tend towards art are present in the Mevlevi order, those who crave ascetic lifestyle go to the Qadiriyya, those who are more interested in *adhkar* and silent *dhikr* join the Naqshbandiyya, those who are hardy and brave approach the Rifa'i, those who want more worship lean towards the Khalwatiyya, and so their paths diverge."<sup>258</sup>

### 1. The Naqshbandi Order

The followers of the Naqshbandi order represent 80 percent of Sufi adherents in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The spread of the Naqshbandi *tariqa* and its dominance over the spiritual arena go back to its observance of social norms. According to Dr. Samir Beglerovic (trans-

<sup>257</sup> <https://www.scribd.com/doc/141500772/Šejh-Zakir-ef-Bektic>

<sup>258</sup> Abd al-Baqi Khalifa, "al-Naqshbandiyya Hafazat 'ala Zakhmiha min khilal al-Tabaqa al-Muthaqqafa, wa Shuyukhuha Yujidun Akthar min Lughā," *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 5, 2010.

<https://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?issueno=11700&article=589532#.Xrd12i2B0ch>

lator of al-Ghazali's *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* into Bosnian), "anything that conflicts with the teachings of Islam has no place in Naqshbandiyya," but "the effectiveness of the Naqshbandi order lies in its readiness, it embraces the era and understands the changes that it brings, so it adapts to them and meets them with practical positions."

The Naqshbandi order also maintained its momentum through its leaders, who hail from the educated class, and its polyglot shaykhs who are passionate for the arts in all their forms, like the Hacı Milic family. The Milic clan was successful in attracting a large number of people to the Naqshbandi order, including people from the countryside. It is thanks to the Milic family that Sufism was rebuilt, or rather that the work of Sufi orders was revived, something in which they had great success.

## 2. The Rifa'i Order

The adherents of the Rifa'iyya represent 15 percent of adherents of Sufi orders nationwide. There are many hypotheses for why the Rifa'i order is not more widespread in Bosnia. Some refer to a certain tendency towards freedom among Bosnian people, who do not tend toward reclusiveness and asceticism, as the Turks or the Albanians do for example. The Rifa'iyya by nature pushes one towards greater abstinence and moderation, and for that reason it has attracted followers from the urban poor. In fact, it appears that the order has receded greatly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, save for the vigor it regained in Sarajevo at the hands of a shaykh from Prizern (a city in Kosovo) named Jamal Shehu, one of the shaykhs active in the orders that joined to found the coalition of Sufi orders. The order continues to spread in Sarajevo and another close city called Vareš, as well as in Srebrenica.<sup>259</sup>

There are also *tekije* for the Qadiri, Mevlevi, and Shadhili orders, but their presence is negligible in comparison to the Naqshbandiyya and Rifa'iyya. Collectively, the numbers of adherents and pres-

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<sup>259</sup> "Darawish Kusufu Yuharrirun al-Ruh bi-Ghars al-Sikh fi al-Jasad," DW Arabic, <https://cutt.us/sdYWV>

ence of these orders remain meager relative to the outsize influence of Sufism on the social and political life of non-religious and non-Sufi Bosniaks. It is this influence that produced a form of popular Islam that allows Bosnia's Muslims a special identity that distinguishes them from their Serb and Croat neighbors, with whom they share a common language and origins but differ in religion. Perhaps this is one of the reasons that has granted Sufism its power in the current era.

### **The Influence of Sufism on Bosniak Life A Model of Social Influence: Popular Celebrations**

There are many popular celebrations in Bosnia that are influenced by Sufi heritage and rituals, which occur yearly on specific dates and attract widespread media coverage, with support from the Islamic Community, the Reisu-l-ulema (Grand Mufti), and national authorities. Bosniak nationalist and religious sentiments mix together during these celebrations, and while some Bosniaks see these events to be some festivals of good, as signs of blessing, acceptance, and closeness to God, politicians and ruling figures meanwhile take advantage of the congregation of people to shore up Bosniak nationalist sentiment and the preservation of national unity. Some of these celebrations are shared with other countries of the Islamic world, such as the Islamic New Year, the Prophet's Birthday, Isra' and Mi'raj, the Battle of Badr, Ashura, Laylat al-Qadr, while others are specific to the Bosniaks, the most widespread of which is known as *Ajvatovica*, which some Sufis call "the lesser Hajj."

Each year on the 27<sup>th</sup> of June, Bosniaks of all different social classes make their way to the village of Prusac to celebrate *Ajvatovica*. The village is distinctive for the presence of a narrow passage between two large rocks. An ancestral story that is traced back to a saint named Ajvaz Dedo says that he prayed to God to bring water to the small village despite the impossibility of the matter. However, God answered his prayers and the huge rock split open and water flowed out from it. In commemoration of this event, those coming to celebrate pass between the two rocks and stop to pray and read Su-

rat al-Fath and visit the tomb of Ajvaz Dedo. The location is considered to be one of the most famous places of gathering for prayer.

There is also the celebration at the mausoleum of Hasan Kaimija, in the city of Zvornik, which is celebrated over four days in the middle of June in honor of Hasan Kaimija. Each year it features the participation of senior Islamic figures and is attended by dervishes from Turkey and other neighboring countries. During the visit, some people slaughter sacrificial animals in his honor and distribute the meat to the poor, among other celebrations that occur in different regions of Bosnia.

An indication of the grip that these customs have on the spirit of Bosnians is that even the Islamic scholars who reject Sufism and “innovations” have come to affirm these celebrations. However, that they call for a transformation in the meaning of these events from their widespread significance that sees the location as a sacred shrine intended for worship, into a good tradition that brings people together to remember God and pray to Him, or perhaps a ritual that encourages heroism among the youth.

### **A Model of Political Influence: Relations with Iran**

As happened with the spread of Salafism, the war served as an open door to Iranian influence on the Muslims of Bosnia at the highest levels. Some consider that what brings Shi'ite thought closer to Bosnia's Muslims is the extent and depth of the Sufi dimension in their collective consciousness, as they too celebrate Al al-Bayt (the Prophet's family) and are fond of rituals and events such as the celebrations of Ashura and the Battle of Karbala.

Iran-affiliated cultural institutions in Bosnia, like the Ibn Sina Institute and the Mulla Sadra Foundation, were eager to highlight this similarity and have published some of the most valuable Sufi books in Bosnian translation. The Iranian cultural center, for its part, put on a celebration for the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jalal al-Din Rumi's birth in partnership with the Faculty of Islamic Sciences and the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo. Shi'ite publishing houses and websites also pub-

lish materials praising Sufi orders and their shaykhs. This special relationship between Iran and some Islamic leaders in Bosnia has resulted in economic agreements and trade facilitations, but they have recently been subject to rollbacks as a result of American pressure, as well as Iran's incursions in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and the rise of Erdogan's followers among the Party of Democratic Action.<sup>260</sup>

### **The Contemporary Men of Sufism: Halil Hulusi Brzina as a Model**

Brzina started as an engineer in a tobacco company before the outbreak of the war, emerged as a general in the Bosnian Army's 7<sup>th</sup> brigade, and subsequently went on to become one of the most powerful and influential figures in the Party of Democratic Action. Brzina founded the Mejtša *tekija* in Sarajevo, and brought life to the Naqshbandi order thanks to his contacts and skills, attracting a large number of youth as well as individuals of high social standing including doctors, engineers and politicians. Branches have opened throughout Bosnia and abroad.

Halil Hulusi's *tekija* in the Sarač Ismail mosque in Mejtša has become a center of political influence in the country, a brotherhood for elites the likes of senior members of the SDA (SDA; the country's ruling Bosniak party, founded by the late president Alija Izetbegović). The media reports that many decisions and appointments are made with the blessing of Brzina Effendi.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Muhammad Hattab, "al-Nufudh al-Irani fi al-Busna Khanjar fi Khasirat Uruba, Iran Post," August 8, 2019, <https://cutt.us/NU7FK>

<sup>261</sup> Nicolaas H. Biegan, *Living Sufism: Rituals in the Middle East and the Balkans*, p119-120





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CHAPTER THREE

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## Feminist Sufism and Sufi Feminism



## WHAT CAN SUFISM AND FEMINISM LEARN FROM EACH OTHER?

*Dr. Nayla Tabbara*

I was asked to write a chapter for this book on the subject of Sufism and feminism. At first, I was going to say no. It is true that I work on these two issues—Islamic feminism and Sufism—but I usually work on them separately because, epistemologically speaking, they belong to two different worlds.

Sufism is a knowledge of the heart and an experiential “tasting” (*dhawq*), by which I mean that it is a form of knowledge derived from spiritual experience, and thus varies from person to person. Islamic Sufism has its origins in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AH, and has developed and spread throughout history until the present day. It has produced both individual and collective manifestations. It has expressed itself through Sufi ethics, mystical philosophy, ecstatic utterances (*shatbat*), poetry, art, music, *wajd* circles and *hadrat* gatherings. Each of these different practices has the same goal: to reach the True God and achieve union with Him.

Feminism, on the other hand, is a 20th-century phenomenon advocating for women’s rights, which addresses both overt and covert discrimination against women. This discrimination manifests itself in cultures around the world, through religions, laws, public culture, mentalities, artistic works, popular proverbs, and even the way history is written. In response to this, feminism is both a deconstructionist intellectual approach as well as a movement that advocates for women’s rights. It seeks the truth, but here in the sense of justice and equality.

Since the feminist movement has criticized religion as an oppressive patriarchal system, there has also been a need to articulate feminist theologies— that is, modes of piety that denounce the op-

pression women face in the name of religion. These approaches do not view religion, or God, as inherently oppressive, but rather trace patriarchal structures back to medieval Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsir*). They argue that new forms of *tafsir* can liberate women from such mindsets and patriarchal structures by locating gender equality in the original religious texts. It is through this methodology of reestablishing women's rights through new interpretations of religious texts that Islamic, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist and other pious feminisms have developed.

In this paper, rather than trying to compare Sufism and feminism, I will attempt to demonstrate what each of these paths of knowledge can learn from the other.

### **What can feminism learn from Sufism?**

Islamic feminism means working from inside Islam to reestablish a presence and voice for women in both religious and social spheres. Islamic feminism was founded with the belief that God is just, and that in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, Islam opened doors for women in the Arabian Peninsula that had previously been closed. It also argues that the Prophet Muhammad treated women equally to men, and that the Qur'an affirms the equality of creation in stating that women and men were created {from one soul}<sup>262</sup> and that {male and female believers are each other's protectors}.<sup>263</sup>

Thus, Islamic feminism claims that many of the passages that in fact support women's rights were distorted by patriarchal structures. Until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and Qur'anic *tafsir* were written by men within the particular cultural and historical frameworks of their day.

Since the 1980s, Islamic feminism has focused on three key issues:

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<sup>262</sup> Qur'an 4:1

<sup>263</sup> Qur'an 9:71

- Reinterpreting the text and producing new *tafsir* with women in mind, keeping in mind that the text seeks liberation and justice for humankind.
- Rewriting *fiqh* jurisprudence pertaining to women and changing personal status laws accordingly.
- Reestablishing the role that women formerly occupied in the religious sphere during the early days of Islam as scholars and leaders. There are women from whom we have received many of the Prophet's *hadith*, including Aisha and Umm Salama, who interpreted jurisprudential matters and advised the rightly-guided caliphs. Other examples include Umm Waraqa, who led the prayer for her household, as well as other female companions and followers of the Prophet.

Sufism also offers feminism clear historical examples of the pioneering role that women played in the religious sphere. Books written by Sufis in the early centuries of Islam were full of stories of women who were examples for both men and women, and exhibited the strength and devotion necessary to participate in spiritual life. I will cite some examples from the biographical *tabaqat* literature, which includes what others said about these women. Ibn al-Jawzi mentions in his book *Sifat al-Safwa* that Abu Khalida said: "I never saw anyone, man or woman, with greater strength or patience in all their endeavors than Umm Hayyan al-Salamiyya, who in the mosque looked as if she were a palm tree that the winds blew left and right (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1999, 4:32). This and many other similar references indicate that women in the first centuries of Islam used to go to mosques, and moreover, were role models for their community. Additionally, there were female teachers and preachers who preached to both men and women, and were called "Knowers of God" [*arrafat*, or women who had attained mystic or esoteric knowledge of God]. Among the most important of these was Sha'wana (2nd century AH). Al-Sulami wrote that she was a "remarkable woman, with a good voice and pitch, who would preach and recite to the people, and the ascetics and worshippers..." (al-Sulami, 1998, 394). There was also

Fatima al-Nisaburiyya (d. 223/838) who was praised by Dhul Nun al-Misri and Abu Yazid al-Bistami. Al-Sulami like wiseregarded her as one of the major *'arafat*. Abu Yazid al-Bistami wrote: "I only saw one man and one woman [of that caliber]. The woman was Fatima al-Nisaburiyya. Whenever I told her about one of the *maqamat* (stages of Sufism), my description was evident to her." Dhul Nun al-Misri also said, "She was a friend of God (*waliya*), and she is my teacher" (al-Sulami, 1998, 400-401).

Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya was known as "the learned teacher" (*al-mu'addiba*), and she was a model for the Sufis and *hadith*-narrators of her time. Ja'far Ibn Sulayman said: "Sufyan al-Thawri [an important *hadith*-narrator] took me by the hand and said, 'Let us go to the *mu'addiba*, for I would be at my wit's end without her'" (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1999: 2:24).

In another story, "Riyah al-Qaysi and Salih ibn 'Abd al-Jalil and Kullab came to visit Rabi'a. They discussed the temporal world and began to condemn it, and Rabi'a said: Indeed I see all four corners of the temporal world in your hearts. And they said: How did you come to suspect us of that? And she said: You looked to the thing that was closest to your hearts, and that is what you spoke of" (Ibn al-Jawzi, 1999 2:24).

They were female teachers (*mu'addibat* and *mu'allimat*) for women and men who were unafraid to admonish men for their lack of belief in the Sufi path. For example, Fatima bint Ahmad al-Jahafiyya (4<sup>th</sup> century AH) said, "I said to my father 'Abbas al-Dinawari as he was talking about intimacy (with God): How beautiful is your description of what you yourself lack" (Al-Sulami, 1998, 409).

Umm al-Fadl al-Wahtiyya (4<sup>th</sup> century AH) "was unique among women of that time, in her speech, her work, and life. She befriended many shaykhs at the time. Shaykh Imam Abu Sahl Muhammad ibn Sulayman, God rest his soul, used to attend her talks and listened to what she said. All the other poor shaykhs did this, including my father al-Qasim al-Razi and Muhammad al-Fara' and Abdullah al-Mu'allim and others of that group. She used to say 'Be careful that

you are not occupied in seeking ease for yourselves while you fancy that you are seeking knowledge. The one who seeks knowledge must work for it. Working towards knowledge is not just fasting often, or giving alms, and prayer. The path to knowledge is for a person to devote his work to God, with good intent, and have regard that God is watching him, even if he is not watching God” (al-Sulami, 1998, 418-419).

These women were not only pioneers in education and in preaching, but also in the *tafsir* of the religious texts. Hakima al-Dimashqiyya, for example, was a teacher (*mu'allima*) to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya, and she explained to Rabi'a the meaning of the verse, {Only those who come to God with a sound heart (will be saved)} (Qur'an 26: 89). She said that this meant that “you should receive God and not have anyone else in your heart besides Him,” and upon saying this Rabi'a entered into a Sufi state of spiritual intoxication (*sukr*) (al-Sulami, 1998: 397). Rabi'a added that a man said to her “I have committed many sins. If I repent, will I be forgiven?” And she said, “No, rather, if you are forgiven, then you have repented,” drawing on 9:118 of Surat al-Tawba: {He forgave them, so that they might repent} (al-Munawi 1:288). Fatima bint 'Abbas (d. 714, in Cairo) was described by al-Nabhani as “the Sufi *shaykha*, *mufti*, teacher, jurist (*faqih*), worshipper (*'abida*), scholar, ascetic” and preacher. She would go up to the pulpit and preach to the people. Al-Munawi said that she “knew *fiqh* and its precise ambiguities and its intractable challenges.” She used to debate with the Shafi'i jurist Ibn al-Wakil (al-Nabhani, 2002, 259 and al-Munawi, 3:64).

It is notable that these women did not need a man's name in order to obtain this social status. There are many references to Rabi'a and other women of her time, who refused all offers of marriage, and were well-known and respected as Sufi women, *'arafat*, and preachers. Other women at that time left social life and went to live in the wilderness, and were still socially accepted, and mentioned by major Sufi leaders like Dhul Nun al-Misri. These women demonstrate that Sufi women had a certain freedom of choice regarding their fate and what kind of life they wished to lead. Society at the time respected



that freedom, even as restrictions for women in other sectors of society grew.

The story of Maymuna al-Suda' and 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zaid also clearly demonstrates the liberation of Sufi women from restrictive gender norms. 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zaid said: "I asked God Almighty for three nights to show me my companion in heaven. He said to me: 'Abd al-Wahid, your companion in heaven is Maymuna al-Suda'. So I said: 'Where is she?' And it was said to me: 'She is among such-and-such people in Kufa,' So I went to Kufa, and asked about her, but the people said, 'She is a crazy sheep-herder.' Still, I said, 'I want to see her.' They said, 'Go then and see her, but she is strange.' I went out and found her standing and praying, and between her hands was a walking stick, and she was wearing a wool cloak, on which was written: *not to be bought or sold*. When the sheep lives among the wolves, the wolves do not eat the sheep, and the sheep are not afraid of the wolves. When she saw me, she stopped praying and said: 'Come back later, Ibn Zaid, this is not the appointed time. The appointed time is tomorrow.' I said, 'Good gracious, who told you that I am Ibn Zaid?' She said, 'I learned that souls are soldiers, and those you become acquainted with you join with, and those which repel you, you move away from.' And I said to her: 'Preach to me.' And she said 'How strange is the preacher who is preached to, who told me there is no servant who is given something from the world and seeks it again, only to have God take it away, for the love of being alone with Him. He replaced some of the proximity with distance, and some of the intimacy with loneliness.' Then, she recited poetry. I said to her, 'I see the wolves with the sheep, and the sheep do not panic among the wolves and the wolves are not eating the sheep, why is that?' She said: 'Away from me! For I have made right what is between me and my Lord, and He made right matters between the wolves and the sheep (al-Nabhani, 2002, 2:412-413).

Maymuna was not only a preacher with insight (*basira*) who had attained unveiling (*kashf*), but she was also not interested in the man who was going to be her companion in heaven; she was occupied only with God. The most important thing in her story for this article is the wool cloak that she wore upon which was written "not

to be bought or sold.” In these words we see a self-aware woman rejecting the patriarchal system of her time, as if she were cutting through history and starting the feminist movement. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AH, she refuses to be treated as a commodity.

It is also worth mentioning that the records we have of well-known Sufi women in the early centuries of Islam are of women from all social classes: affluent, poor, and even female servants. However, things have changed over time. Examining the *tabaqat* literature reveals that after the 5<sup>th</sup> century AH, there were gradually more well-known Sufi women from educated families and Sufi lineages. Still, there are some examples of women from other backgrounds, such as Sitt ‘Ajam bint al-Nafis (d. after 686/1287), an illiterate woman who interpreted Ibn ‘Arabi’s *Meccan Revelations* (*al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya*).

The later evolution of Sufism was similar to that of other Islamic religious sciences in that it took place at the expense of women, particularly after the 6<sup>th</sup> century AH. With the beginning of the *madrasa*—that is, of institutes of Islamic education—women’s roles became more limited. These centers of study were founded as places for men only. Women continued their studies from home, and attained teaching authorizations (*ijazat*), but the number of women doing this was significantly smaller than in the earlier centuries (and certainly compared to the number of men at that time). Additionally, the organization of Sufism into different Sufi orders (*turuq*) further limited women’s role in Sufism because the orders were intended for men only. Some orders did accept women alongside men, but this was generally still under the leadership of a male shaykh. There are certain instances of women’s orders led by a female *shaykha*, some of which still exist today. There are also there some Sufi women and Shi’ite and Sunni *‘irfaniyyat* who held and continue to hold spiritual and intellectual leadership roles.

In summary, there are many instances of women in leadership positions in religious matters throughout Sufi history, whether in an authority role, writing exegesis of spiritual and religious texts, or as a preacher or teacher. Very few of these women were concerned with texts that dealt with women specifically, because their central con-

cern was spiritual life, and the esoteric meaning (*tafsir batini*) of texts. They thereby opened doors for women to participate in religious interpretation, something that had usually been in hands of men.

### **What can Sufism learn from feminism?**

The 20th century witnessed the rise of the feminism movement as well as progress in the role of Muslim women in religious *tafsir*. The 1960s saw Qur'anic *tafsir* written by women for the first time. These included the Egyptian Sunni writer 'Aisha 'Abd al-Rahman, who wrote under the pen name "Bint al-Shati" and published *al-Tafsir al-Bayani li-l-Qur'an al-Karim*, in two parts. Another work of exegesis was published by Nusrat Amin, an Iranian Twelver Shi'ite and *'irfaniyya*. This book was entitled "A Storehouse Full of Secrets" and was published in Persian in fifteen volumes. 'Aisha 'Abd al-Rahman and Nusrat Amin did not belong to the feminist movement per se, because they did not work in the spheres in which Islamic feminism was focused. Nevertheless, they achieved immense progress in shaping the role of women in religious studies and *tafsir* in the Islamic context.

Meanwhile, the feminist movement has also worked on Qur'anic *tafsir*, but has focused specifically on the issue of women in its exegesis. In many parts of the world—the Arab world, Southeast Asia, Iran, Turkey, India, and the West) there have been women academics and scholars working to re-interpret religious texts. Their approaches can be characterized in three ways:

- First, they address the text of Qur'an in its entirety. Rather than looking at verses that addressed male guardianship (*qawwama*) or women's testimony on their own, they read these verses within the broader context to more holistically understand the Qur'an's view of women and men.

- Second, they read the verses in historical context and analyze the significance and the relevant implications for women today.

- Third, they deconstruct previous patriarchal exegesis as a product of its time. It thus needs to be replaced with new *tafsir* that takes into account the actual status afforded to women in the original text.

These feminist approaches to *tafsir* hold that the Qur'an is among the few religious texts that take women into consideration. As evidence, they draw upon the story of Umm Salama who said to the prophet: "O Prophet, you have mentioned men, but we are not mentioned," and so the verse saying {the Muslim women and men, the female and male believers ...} was revealed, (Qur'an 33:35, al-Tabari 1999 10:300). Additionally, feminists point out that God created men and women as equals from the same soul (Qur'an 4:1) and that the stewardship over Earth that God granted was for humanity, not for men only, and that and the trust and responsibility (*amana*) that people hold is held by both men and women.

Feminists describe a kind of slippage that occurs in Qur'anic *tafsir* during the early centuries of Islam. In the Qur'anic story of Adam and Eve, for example, it is not Eve who is at fault but rather the two of them together or Adam only ({So the Devil made them both fall, and expelled them . . .} Qur'an 2:36). There is no place in the text where Eve is mentioned as the one at fault for this error. Rather, the exegetes inserted that concept in later *tafsir*, drawing on *Isra'iliyyat* lore. Likewise, the idea that Eve was created from Adam's rib is not present in the original Qur'an, but rather was added in later *hadith*. On this basis, feminist scholars have engaged in a reconsideration of *hadith*, in order to reexamine those which are not explicitly consistent with the intent of the text of the Qur'an. They judge that such *hadith* are more likely to have been forged (*mawdu'*). These scholars argue that a just God created men and women as equals in dignity, and gave them equal responsibility on this earth {And the male and female believers are both protectors of each other. They both enjoy what is just, forbid what is evil, observe regular prayers, practice regular charity, and obey God and his messenger. God will have mercy on them, for he is Almighty and Wise} (Qur'an9:71).

Starting from this comprehensive view of the Qur'an that holds that there is equality between men and women in the eyes of God, feminist scholars<sup>264</sup> have turned to specific verses that need to be reexamined in light of their specific historical context. With the issue of marriage, for example, scholars point to the verses that say that men and women are each other's "garments" (2:187) and that God created "love and mercy" between men and women, and made them a source of "peace of mind" for each other (30:21). They point out that marriage is described as between a man and a woman, not a man and several women, and explain the third verse of Surat al-Nisa' (4:3) in light of this: {And if you fear that you will not be just in dealing with the orphans, then marry of other women as may be agreeable to you, two, or three, or four; and if you fear you will not be able to do justice, then marry only one or marry what your right hand possesses. Thus it is more likely that you will not do injustice.} The feminist scholars argue that this is not an order that men should marry more than one woman, but rather is a restriction on a particular Arab custom in the 7th century AD, which is why it includes the stipulations involving orphans and justice. This verse thus forms part of the Qur'anic model of education, which gradually leads humanity away from their previous customs toward the virtues desired by God.

The same is true with the issue of inheritance. The Qur'an opened up the possibility of inheritance for women, most of whom had not previously been able to inherit, and allowed for a will. However, jurists restricted this right. Surat al-Nisa' (4:11) reads: {God directs you as regards your children's [inheritance]: to the male, a portion equal to that of two females.} However, this can be read as a call to not underestimate the value of women, in cases where some might give a girl less than half of what her brother receives in the inheritance. In other words, feminists call on us to read these verses not with a medieval patriarchal mentality that sees men as having greater value than women, but with an ethical, Qur'anic approach that affirms that men and women have equal value before God. If the origi-

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<sup>264</sup> What I have described here comes from the work of female scholars such as Asma Murabit, Zahia Jouirou, Asma Barlas, Amina Wadud, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, and others.

nal purpose was to ensure that women inherited no less than half of what men inherited, today it is incumbent upon jurists to derive new rulings. These new rulings must take into account the objectives (*maqasid*) of the text, and the current context of the twenty-first century where men and women work as equals.

Feminist scholars and activists are also working to reexamine the personal status laws that are prejudicial to women's rights, especially in matters of divorce, alimony, and child custody and support. These matters are not present in the text of the Qur'an and are instead drawn from outdated *fiqh* jurisprudence. The consequences of maintaining these laws are heartbreaking. There are women who lose everything in order to get a divorce from a violent man, and women who cannot see their children because the children were taken by the father or father's family at a very early age. There are still others who cannot support their children due the lack of alimony or child support as the result of a judge's ruling. According to feminist scholars, changing these unjust laws that undermine women's rights is not an attempt to impinge upon the Shari'a. Instead, it is these unjust laws that impinge upon the objectives (*maqasid*) of God's Shari'a, and do an injustice to what God wants for us, as those who bear His Trust.

What can Sufism learn from these stances and methodologies? In its early years, Sufism was a means of protesting against tyranny. Sufis stood up to their rulers and denounced opulence and the loss of the Islamic values. Because of this, Sufis wore wool and tattered clothes. They also condemned those they called "*ulama' al-rusum*" (scholars of outward prescriptions), that is, those whose salary was paid by the palace, and who thus lost their freedom and credibility. The development of Sufism into Sufi orders happened at the same time as a change in power (at the end of the Abbasid and Seljuk periods). The focus during this time became obedience to the ruler, and the matter was framed as a religious issue. This happened at the same time as the calls for obedience to one's Sufi leader (*al-shaykh al-murabbi*) (Hartmann, 1999, 813). This changed Sufi stances on issues, and they were transformed from those who challenged the political reality to those loyal to the rulers and the "*ulama' al-rusum.*" Since

that time, there have been Sufis who seized power and maintained the same power structures after, as well as Sufis who turned away from political involvement to focus on spiritual and social functions only. In the latter case, Sufis have become involved in helping people in poorer neighborhoods through civil society organizations. The exception to the above two categories are those Sufis who resisted colonization.

Therefore, we find that most of the Sufi orders and schools today hold fairly conservative positions regarding political and social matters. The Sufi community holds some of the same suspicions about feminism that is usually seen in traditionalist quarters, particularly regarding new forms of Qur'anic *tafsir* that work towards feminist liberation. The fear is that if the door is opened to these new interpretations, the religious institution will be beset by chaos, and that there could be forms of Sufi piety developing that are not consistent with God's will. However, both male and female feminist Sufis argue that it is the injustices that women have faced in the courts and in patriarchal *tafsir* that is contrary to God's will. They contend that anti-feminist positions do not represent religious arguments, but rather cultural arguments made in the name of religion.

The South African thinker and liberation theologian Farid Esack, who has been active in the struggle against apartheid and gender-based discrimination, said: "How many were there who insisted that their path was one of 'spiritual reformation' and that they had nothing to do with 'politics' but who, in private, and occasionally not so privately, actively supported the apartheid regime? Spirituality without politics, I increasingly understood, was far from being neutral; quite the contrary, it was, and is, invariably supportive of oppressive socio-economic systems" (Esack, 1999, 92).

This is what I think Sufism has to learn from the feminist movement. Feminism can inspire Sufism to re-engage as it once did in political and social spheres, and to take up its position among men and women activists to end the injustices that that women face— or at the very least, to help Sufis find a way out of their political neutrality.

## Conclusion

Although feminism and Sufism belong to two different worlds, the two share a yearning for truth. For Sufism, this is the absolute Truth, whereas for feminism, it is a more earthly truth: justice in this world. If we think about the lives of the prophets, all of them shared a common striving towards these two understandings of truth: seeking God, and striving for justice. In the Qur'an, Surat al-Tahrim (66: 11-12) gives male and female believers the example of Asiya, the Pharaoh's wife, and Maryam bint 'Imran (the Virgin Mary). Why Asiya and Maryam? Because they demonstrated spiritual depth alongside strength in confronting patriarchal structures and the tyranny of their day. Asiya had the depth of belief to challenge her husband the Pharaoh; in Maryam's case, closeness to God helped her confront her people who said to her, {You have committed something that is totally unexpected} (Qur'an 19:27). In addition to this spiritual courage, these two women also possessed the strength to challenge the prevailing mentalities of the day. Through such stories, we can come to see that although feminism and Sufism are epistemologically distinct, they share both a yearning for truth and the courage to achieve it.





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## FEMINIST THOUGHT AND SUFISM

*Samar al-Fawaljeh*

Feminist thought has created new forms of consciousness in its relationship with religion and worked to articulate liberation for women from inside religion itself. In other words, it aims to deconstruct religious heritage and demonstrate that culture and other historically-contingent human actions have contributed to legitimizing negative perceptions about women in the name of religion. However, it is possible to return to the original religious texts, leaving behind the later baggage of *fiqh* and *tafsir*, and in so doing cleanse religion of these patriarchal interpretations. It is also possible to return to forms of piety that represented a sort of revolution against official orthodoxy and that transformed the prevailing male domination and male centrism. And it is precisely here that feminism and Sufism intersect.

Within the Islamic tradition, Sufism poses at least in part a revolutionary challenge to religious institutions. Islamic jurists, Sufis, and scholastic theologians consider the Qur'an and the Sunnato be undisputed sources of religious knowledge. However, Sufis also employ other means of deriving religious knowledge, as they consider subjective spiritual experience to be the foundation of this knowledge. For Sufis, taking refuge in these religious experiences is a means to recapture prophetic experience, through using the framework of esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*) to understand the Prophet's shari'a.<sup>265</sup>

Feminism has found a fertile ground in Sufism for developing feminist religiosities. Feminists draw upon biographical literature (*tarajim* and *tabaqat*) on the religious and social roles of Sufi women, as well as texts written by Sufi men who made space for women

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<sup>265</sup> Abu Zaid, Nasr Hamid. *Hakadha Takallama Ibn 'Arabi*, 24.

within the ideological and philosophical structures of Sufism, especially Ibn ‘Arabi and Jalal al-Din Rumi.

The feminist movement—which is essentially post-structuralist—aims to combat patriarchal authority in all its forms and to work to dismantle these structures. What feminism finds in Sufism is a female take on existence, through removing binaries (such as nature and spirit), and through its conception of unity, which Sufis call “the unity of being” (*wahdat al-wujud*).

Among key works of feminist scholarship that explore the role of women in Sufism are Souad al-Hakim’s book *al-Mar’a wa-l-Tasawwuf wa-l-Haya* (Women, Sufism, and Life), Nezha Berrada’s *al-Unutha fi Fikr Ibn ‘Arabi* (Women in the Thought of Ibn ‘Arabi) and Sa’diyya Shaikh’s *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn ‘Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*. One can also find Sufi material in the writings of Olfa Youssef, such as in her book *Wajh Allah: Thalatha Subul ila Al-Haqq* (The Face of God: Three Paths to Truth).

The evocation of spiritual and worldly authority endows women with Sufi insight (*basira*) that is grounded in the social struggle for women’s rights—not only for achieving equality, but also personal sovereignty and liberation from patriarchal authority.<sup>266</sup>

Re-examining the essence of Sufism is a revolutionary project resembling the project that El-Messiri criticized for its call to re-examine everything—from history and language to symbolism, and even human nature itself as manifested in historical institutions and works of art. In this view, all of these represent nothing except a deviation from the true path of history.<sup>267</sup>

## 1. Gender and Sexuality in Sufi Thought

Islam set off a revolution in prevailing social norms in the Arabian Peninsula with regard to cultural practices and ways of thinking. The Qur’an criticized pre-Islamic practices such as female infanticide

<sup>266</sup> Siam, Shehata, *al-Harim al-Sufi wa Ta’nith al-Din*, 310.

<sup>267</sup> El-Messiri, Abdel Wahab. *al-Tamarkuz Hawla al-Untha*, 22.

and blackening one's face when a girl was born. Islam gave women their rightful status and affirmed that there was no difference between a woman and a man before God, because he created them from a single soul, gave them both equal dignity, and showed favor on the basis of soundness of heart and righteousness of deed.

Feminists argue that the legacy of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) eroded the status of women that existed in early Islam, as *fiqh* texts attempted to make women invisible again, and established a gender hierarchy that favored men over women. Additionally, *hadith* with weak chains of narration came to constitute cultural norms that further entrenched the marginalization and subordination of women, and limited women's role in society to marriage and childbearing.

The scholar Annemarie Schimmel wrote a book about women in Sufism entitled *Meine Seele ist eine Frau* (My Soul Is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam), in which she highlights the presence of women in Sufism. Schimmel presents a Sufi interpretation of some Qur'anic verses by drawing on Eastern philosophy, and particularly the concept of Yin and Yang. Since time immemorial, Chinese thought has held that these two forces (Yin and Yang) govern all of life and existence. They form two opposing poles: positive and negative, female and male, but there is no possible existence for one without the other, for they are in opposition but not in conflict.<sup>268</sup> Similarly, Islam also depends on the two opposing forces of women and men: {It is made lawful for you to go unto your wives on the night of the fast. They are a garment for you and you are a garment for them} (Qur'an 2:187). Women and men are thus the superego for each other, since "garment" here stands for the person.<sup>269</sup>

Schimmel also draws upon Farid al-Din 'Aṭṭar's *Tadhkirat al-Awliya'* (Biographies of the Saints) in how the terms "man and "woman" are tied to a form that is made of clay, i.e. the body, whereas the soul is not connected to any of these forms. Thus, when women and men are wholly in God, there is no trace of their earthly existence.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> Lao Tzu, *Kitab al-Tao*, Ta'liq wa-Sharh Firas al-Sawwah, 9.

<sup>269</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie, *Ruhi Untha*, 36.

<sup>270</sup> Schimmel, 134.

Furthermore, ‘Attar includes Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya under the chapter on men, defending this choice with a saying of the prophet (“God does not look to your outward forms.”) God is not concerned with appearance but rather intent, so if a woman was like a man on God’s path, then she could not be called a woman.<sup>271</sup>

Sufi traditions reveal the important role that women have played in fulfilling the unity of the spirit. Women, like men, have reached the final stage of sainthood (*wilaya*) and that is what makes spirituality a right accessible to all people. For example, in Ibn ‘Arabi’s through, the division between men and women dissolves, since in his view, men were like the intellect (*‘aql*) and women like the soul (*nafs*). Since the intellect must follow the soul, he reasoned, female imams should also be permissible.<sup>272</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi’s vision of humanity was based on its being formed out of a single soul that split apart, out of which came man and woman as two siblings, equal in body and spirit. To further affirm that there was no difference between men and women, Ibn ‘Arabi drew on the hadith that states, “Women are siblings of men,” which he used as a legal basis to demonstrate that rulings applicable to men should also be applicable to women.<sup>273</sup>

According to Nezha Berrada, just as Heidegger wrote that language is the house of being, Ibn ‘Arabi strove to establish women’s humanity through making space for women in an obviously male-centric language. Ibn ‘Arabi used the word *nafs* (soul) to denote people, and explained this in the following saying: “For it was said to one of them: How many *abdal* are there? And he said: Forty souls (*nafs*). Then it was said to him: Why don’t you say forty men? And he said: There could be women among them.”<sup>274</sup>

Ibn ‘Arabi had an influence on language and modes of expression similar to the influence that feminists have had. Feminism has

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<sup>271</sup> Rahal Boubrik, *Barakat al-Nisa’*, 17.

<sup>272</sup> Siam, Shehata, *al-Harim al-Sufi wa-Ta’nith al-Din*, 154.

<sup>273</sup> Berrada, Nezha. *al-Unutha fi Fikr Ibn ‘Arabi*, 148.

<sup>274</sup> Berrada, 148-149.

succeeded in establishing a language that does not discriminate on the basis of gender, that is, an ungendered language. As a result of this, there was a striking proliferation in the use of female pronouns, in advertisements, government institutions, plays, and so on. This is one of the most important ways in which feminism spread through society.<sup>275</sup>

Ibn 'Arabi contends that men and women are partners in humanity, and that all of existence depends upon "love." He interpreted one hadith ("In this world, women and perfume have been made dear to me, and my comfort has been provided in prayer") as meaning that women were not made dear to the prophet on his own account, but rather because of God. The prophet's love for his wife, according to Ibn 'Arabi, was actually love of God, and thus loving women was a way of linking God and humanity. He pointed out that the hadith begins with women and ends with prayer, both of which are feminine (in Arabic), and places a masculine word between them. In the same way, men are placed between two femininities in life, the mother's womb from which a man is born, and the woman whom he loves.

Ibn 'Arabi considered love of women to be a means of attaining God's love. In other words, human love was necessary to divine love. Witnessing truth in women is more complete and perfect, as this is more manifest in women than in men. Women are full of goodness and truth, as if one could see God's grace, mercy, and beauty embodied in them.<sup>276</sup>

Rumi had a similar approach, arguing that women were beacons of God's light. He saw women not as beings connected to sexual desire but rather as the highest manifestation of divine love.<sup>277</sup> Male Sufis also expressed their love of God using female metaphors or imagery. For example, in Ibn al-Farid's "Poem of the Sufi Way" (*al-*

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<sup>275</sup> Legenhausen, Muhammad, "al-Islam fi Muwajahat al-Niswiyya," *Majallat al-Istighrab* 16: 15.

<sup>276</sup> Siam, Shehata, *al-Harim al-Sufi wa-Ta'nith al-Din*, 158.

<sup>277</sup> Siam, 59.



*Ta'iyya*), he goes as far as to say that God manifested to Qais in the form of Buthaina.<sup>278</sup>

Women thus held a high status in Sufism that they rarely found in *fiqh* or formal religious institutions. Sufism gave women the status that they had once been afforded in the Qur'an, as an equal part of a divine soul, while also providing space to compete with and even outdo men. This was exactly what later feminists would try to highlight in Sufism, in order to lend legitimacy to the idea that their discourses could be traced back to the days of the saints.

## 2. Miracles (*Karamat*) Performed by Female Sufis

Miracles (*karamat*) often drew upon stories and superstitious legends that supposedly demonstrated a lack of consciousness of the Islamic mind. However, these stories were actually expressions of collective popular imagination, and of its vision and relationship with spirituality. The *manaqib* (hagiographies) about saints' miracles were important in how they framed the relationship with the Creator and the rest of creation. They also imbued individual religious experiences with human and tragic elements in the search for the Absolute and for spiritual annihilation of the self (*fana'*). Other *manaqib* celebrated righteous women (*salihat*) as well as the spiritually bewildered (*walihat*) and divinely possessed (*majdhubat*). These women were thus elevated to a high status beside saints, and some ascended to the stage of *qurb* (nearness to God), which Ibn 'Arabi considered to be the closest to sanctity (*wilaya*).<sup>279</sup>

Sufi women thus found in miracles a space to compete with men in order to demonstrate their sanctity and righteousness. For example, some stories tell of how Hassan al-Basri threw his prayer rug onto the water and called Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya to pray with him. She was surprised that he was "offering his goods in the worldly market," and threw her own rug on the air, motioning to him that he

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<sup>278</sup> Boubrik, *Barakat al-Nisa'*, 109

<sup>279</sup> Boubrik, 27.

should follow suit. He was not able to do as she did, and so she preached to him, and urged him to busy himself with work.

It is true that these hagiographies and miracle stories focused on women were still less numerous in the collections of *manaqib* than those celebrating men. Nevertheless, feminists still found Sufism to be a more welcoming terrain than most other settings.

### 3. Marriage and Sufi Women

The view of Sufi woman towards marriage caused a revolution in the traditional role that women had played. While the role of women had been limited to marriage and reproduction, Sufi women were able to go beyond those roles, since they regarded marriage as an obstacle (*hijab*) to their worship, asceticism, and closeness to God.

The amir of Basra, Muhammad ibn Sulayman al-Hashimi was said to have proposed to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya and offered her a dowry of one hundred thousand. He said to her: I have proceeds of ten thousand per month that I will make over to you. And she replied: "It pleases me that you are my servant, and all your wealth is mine, and that you will only distract me from God for the blink of an eye."<sup>280</sup>

Rabi'a did not view men as a source of temptation, although men sometimes came to try to seduce her. She saw them as men who sought pleasure in women's bodies and wished to defile female purity. So when a man came to propose to Rab'ia, she avoided him for days and then asked him to come in, whereupon she said: Go away, lustful man, and fulfill your desires with a woman like you!<sup>281</sup>

Sufi women had tried to efface their bodies through striving to become closer to God. It was part to the state of asceticism and spiritual exercises that they should work to rid their bodies of feminine features, since these exercises made them thin and dimmed their feminine beauty. It was not that they were averse to their own beauty and appearance, but rather to marriage and what it entailed regard-

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<sup>280</sup> Badawi, Abdel Rahman. *Shahidat al-'Ishq al-Ilahiyy*, 51.

<sup>281</sup> Boubrik, *Barakat al-Nisa'*, 79.

ing obedience to one's husband, childrearing, and housework, which kept them from prayer and isolation. The married women among the Sufis tried to practice abstinence from physical intimacy, while others looked for other wives for their husbands, or simply formed a special relationship with their husbands to live as brother and sister, in order to serve their husband and see to his affairs.

It was said that when Hassan al-Basri proposed to Rabi'a she said to him: "Marriage contracts are made between those who are present, and here I am not present, for I have been annihilated from myself!"

In this way, Sufi women built a special way of life that differed from prevailing norms, in which they abandoned childbearing, weaving and other traditional roles. Instead, they created their own private worlds and remained unmarried in a society that saw women only as wives and mothers without considering their opinion in the matter.

#### **4. The Hijab as a Challenge to Men**

We find in Sufi literature a diversity of viewpoints about the hijab, which came to pose a challenge to men. For example, the sister of al-Hallaj would uncover half of her face, which she explained by saying that the city was empty of men except for al-Hallaj. If al-Hallaj was not there, she said, then she would have uncovered her entire face!

Rumi approached the matter of the hijab from an aesthetic angle, asking "How can God create beauty and then demand that it be covered? Beauty is created to be seen." Rumi wrote:

"All that is created with beauty and ornament  
Was made for the eye to see  
O women who wear hijab! Did you ever awaken  
And adorn yourselves for a blind man?"

The feminist scholar Olfa Youssef wrote in her book *Naqisat 'Aql wa-Din* (Lacking in Wisdom and Religion) that the hijabis connected to a specific historical context in which the purpose was to protect Muslim women, especially mothers, but that the hijab is not a sacred object in and of itself. For example, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab used to beat his female slave who had dressed like a free woman. This was because the purpose of the hijab was to prevent discord as necessary at that particular time.

Nazira Zain al-Din argues that the hijab was a custom specific to rich families at that historical moment, and thus no longer a matter of religious law now. She goes as far as to say that a pure conscience is better than wearing hijab, since goodness does not come from one's appearance but rather from the essence of the self.

Other women have argued that the hijab was a matter of decency pertaining to men and women and men alike. By this logic, the important thing was to wear modest clothing without special, eye-catching ornament. There is an ongoing debate regarding how the hijab should be worn and legislated, but there is general consensus among such women that wearing hijab should be a women's choice and not decided by a man such as her father or husband. As long as men impose the hijab on women saying it is religious obligation, then it is only a cultural practice, as feminists have argued.

Nezha Berrada points out that men have interpreted sacred texts from a male-centric standpoint and endorsed the hijab out of fear that men would be seduced. Thus, women's hijab and men's lack of restraint were exploited in the name of defending women from the animal side of human nature. In this way, women's whole bodies became a site of shame ('*awra*) and impurity that needed to be covered in the name of religion. Berrada cites Ibn 'Arabi, who said, "In our teachings (*madhhab*) there is no additional '*awra* in women beyond the genitalia [which are '*awra* for men as well]." <sup>282</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Berrada, Nezha. *al-Unutha fi Fikr Ibn 'Arabi*, 166.

Berrada presents an esoteric (*batini*) *tafsir* of the hijab similar to that of Ibn ‘Arabi. She argues that the intended meaning of “head-covering,” was covering one’s love of kingship and headship, which applied to men and women both. However, the texts refer to women because the soul (*nafs*) is female. In other words, God commanded that people cover the soul’s love of headship and its aspiration to manifest itself and dominate.

One of the verses of Surat al-A‘raf (7:26) addresses this matter, saying, {Oh children of Adam, We have provided you with garments to cover your shame, and to be an adornment to you. But the best garment is the garment of righteousness}. This line about using clothing to cover one’s nakedness indicates that righteousness serves as a kind of protection, and the clothing that is mentioned beyond that is for ornament. In other words, one’s inner (*batin*) garment is the most important.

The scholar Marta Dominguez Diaz notes that women in the Bouchichiyya Sufi order (i.e., the followers of the Moroccan *murshid* al-Bouchichichi) in Europe wear hijabin order to achieve a kind of independence of spirit, just as Sufi women in England have opted to wear a cap to cover their heads as a means of honoring their Islamic identity.<sup>283</sup>

## Conclusion

Sufi consciousness, at its apex, ascends to a “unitary consciousness,” as Walter Stace put it. This state includes all elements of existence in its entirety, including the polarity of male and female. In all things we find these dualities, for there is no evil without good, no man without woman. These binaries dissolve through the erasing of the individual self. Sufism, therefore, offers women space to fulfill their ambitions to progress spiritually. This is extended in contemporary feminist scholarship to include a call for the erasing of difference and reaching a fluid state in which it is no longer possible to distin-

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<sup>283</sup> Idrissi, Azizal-Kobaiti. *al-Tasawwuf al-Islami fi al-Gharb wa-Jadl al-Khitab al-Niswiyy*. Majallat al-Faisal 513, 35.

guish two separate dualities, and eventually the annihilation of the self.

Feminists draw upon the Foucauldian notion of discourse, arguing that discourse creates the self, just as it creates a basis to formulate a particular consciousness of the world and existence. Thus, feminists turn to Sufism to find a historical grounding for women's rights. In Sufism, feminism seeks an identity that formerly existed but was lost, and highlights texts that aligns with feminist aspirations, while condemning the society that buried these texts such that they became almost entirely forgotten.

The formulation of these ideologies can be observed in the way that feminism has opened itself to Sufi discourse, making its selections according to what suits its needs rather than through an objective study of Sufism. Examining the work of others, such as scholar Abu Bakr Bagader, would reveal a different side of Sufism, such as that of al-Ghazali who had had a negative view of women that which was influenced by his culture context. Feminism evidently has a selective view of Sufism since it does not delve into these other more negative Sufi ideas regarding women.

Instead, feminist Sufism focuses on judging *fiqh* jurisprudence and criticizing the institution of *fiqh*. Their critical approach towards jurists differs from that of Abu Yazid al-Bistami, who said: "They took their dead knowledge from the deceased, but we took our knowledge from the Living who does not die." Instead, feminist critiques were somewhat random, relying upon certain fatwas while ignoring others, as well as overlooking the social and cultural context in which the fatwas were produced, and whether it had sound transmission through the established jurisprudence of the *madhhab*.

Olfa Youssef, in an article about Sufism entitled "al-Tariq ila Qubul al-Akhar" (The Path towards Accepting the Other), argues that the victory of *fiqh* over Sufism resulted in an age of decline in Muslim history, and the closing of the door to further legal inquiry (*ijtihad*), as well as moral decay, technological backwardness, and terrorism. By contrast, feminists seek a religion that is separate from politics, in

which the acceptance of the other comes through the unity of religions, or as Ibn ‘Arabi put it, “that my heart can take on any form.”

Similarly, *Uss al-Shurur: ‘Ard l-il-Ta’assub wa-l-Usuliyya wa-lkhtilal al-Quwwa bayn al-Jinsayn* (The Root of All Evil: An Exposition of Prejudice, Fundamentalism and Gender Imbalance) is written by four women—one Muslim, one Christian, and two Buddhists. They argue that all of these religions share their search for truth, in the form of love and peace, and that all religions lead to God. Thus, they argue, all religions spring from the same source, overlooking different doctrines and laws in different religions.

Regarding interfaith tolerance, Islam contains nothing that supports violent actions such as killing or invading, according to the authors of the abovementioned book. However, the authors also state that the Jewish people have the right to a state in light of their suffering throughout history, and in doing so turn their back on the Palestinians and their right to a state. They call for a return to the “first” society, which was matriarchal; the gods were female until the uprising of the god Marduk, according to legend.

Sufi women have also used religion as a political movement to work towards establishing their authority in religious and worldly spheres. By employing laws of tolerance and understanding that are found in Sufi texts, these Sufi women can thus play a dual role in both Islamic and Western worlds.<sup>284</sup>

This role could be described as passing through the sacred in order to reach the profane. Feminist Sufis are thus working to gain worldly standing in the name of spirituality, and to find a paradise on earth that aligns with Western modernity. They are therefore an instrument of imperialism, deconstructing society as it current exists in order to rebuild it anew.

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<sup>284</sup> Siam, Shehata, *al-Harim al-Sufi wa-Ta’nith al-Din*, 305.

Sufism is an ascetic movement that is based on a lack of worldly pleasures, whereas in feminist discourse Sufism finds itself in the womb of materialism! The righteous women (*salihat*) in biographical literature (*tarajim*) tried to remove their beauty and femininity in order to reach a state of self-annihilation (*fana'*). By contrast, feminist Sufis frame the body as belonging to women and not male guardians, which could be expressed through wearing hijab. The hijabis a cultural norm that could be abandoned, and women could have the right to choose their clothing, provided that it achieves the goal of modesty, which society may define differently at different times.

When Sufi women abandoned marriage and childrearing, they wanted to devote themselves to worship and prayer. Feminist Sufis, in some cases, have taken this refusal to marry as a form of self-fulfillment, with marriage being nothing more than a site of conflict between women and men.

In closing, there are four conclusions that may be drawn:

First: The idea of religion outside the institution of *fiqh* does not carry the same rules and restrictions, and has the capacity to bring people together and achieve reconciliation as aligns with calls for the unity of religion.

Second: Feminism aims to overcome patriarchal hegemony, to restore early matriarchal societal structures, and to achieve worldly possessions through sacred means.

Third: Feminism offers superficial interpretations, uses an ungendered language to overcome difference, and employs the Sufi notion of unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*) to remove boundaries and enter a fluid world that is not controlled by rules and restrictions.

Fourth: Feminist approaches to Sufism demonstrate a secularization of Sufism, removing it from its historical role as an ascetic movement, and moving it closer to other understandings of spirituality.





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CHAPTER FOUR

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Jordanian Sufism: Questions of Revival  
and Societal Shifts



# **SUFISM IN JORDAN: FROM TARIQA-BASED TO NETWORK-BASED SUFISM**

*Mohammad Abu Rumman*

## **Introduction**

Sufi orders (tariqas) entered into Jordanian society through the founding of *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) starting in the 1950s. Prior to this, there were Sufi shaykhs and inherited beliefs, but most regions in the kingdom lacked *zawiyas* and all that accompanies them in terms of shaykhs, *murids* (aspirants), followers, and traditions. There are several reasons behind the first wave of Sufism which relate to the *Nakba* (Palestinians' mass exodus to Jordan during the War of 1948) and the Unification of the Two Banks in 1950. A number of Sufi shaykhs moved to Jordan. Then came the *Naksa* (the Six-Day War of 1967), which further strengthened the presence of Sufism in Jordan and contributed to an increase in the number of *zawiyas* and their spread.

In the seventy years from the earliest presence of tariqa-based Sufism to the present time, we find approximately three generations of Sufis. The first is the founding generation, which opened *zawiyas* and established Sufi orders in society. The second generation propagated the orders, strengthening their presence and their reach. Finally, there is the generation of today's youth, which represents a transitional stage in several regards. Its emergence coincides with state religious policies and with a new wave of Sufism that is tied to political, intellectual, and cultural factors. Today, we find that some Sufi orders are adapting to these changes, others are converting to institutions, and other orders and *zawiyas* are headed for disappearance.

In modern history – specifically, the period spanning from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present – the landscape of Sufism in Jordan has passed through three stages and witnessed a series of

generations. In the establishment phase prior to the spread of *zawiyas* and tariqa-based Sufism, the first and founding generation spent the 1950s and 60s working to set up *zawiyas* and introduce tariqa-based Sufism to Jordan. No one from this generation remains alive today. Next, the second generation took up the process of consolidation and construction; few of these individuals survive today. This was followed by the third generation of tariqa-based Sufism. Finally, we have the generation of today's youth, which clearly represents a new stage in the landscape of Sufism in Jordan.

In this study, we discuss changes in this landscape by investigating the establishment and spread of Sufi orders; examining the institutional, network-based Sufism that is found among today's youth; and exploring the doctrine of Shaykh Noah al-Qudah.

## I. The Founding Generation

The *Nakba* of 1948, followed by the Unification of the Two Banks, ushered in a new age of Sufism in Jordan, as the landscape fundamentally changed. Two individuals who had a major impact since the start of this transformation and who remain prominent symbols of the founding generation are Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id al-Kurdi and the Moroccan-born Shaykh Mustafa al-Filali. In the mid-1950s, both men founded a *zawiya* and undertook educational activities, and both were affiliated with the same doctrine: the Shadhili-Darqawi-'Alawi order.

After Shaykh al-Kurdi founded his *zawiya* in the city of Irbid, he moved to an area near Irbid refugee camp. Next, he relocated to the al-Sarih region and opened a *zawiya* there as well. During the events of the 1970s, the followers of Shaykh al-Kurdi helped erect his tomb and a mosque dedicated to him. As for Shaykh Mustafa al-Filali, he moved to Jordan in 1953 and opened his first *zawiya* near the Hussein Mosque. He then moved to the Hayy al-'Arab area of Zarqa, where he founded a mosque and *zawiya* in his name in 1967.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Abu Hanieh, Hassan. (2011). *Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya, Durub Allah al-Ruhiyya, al-Takayyuf wa-l-Tajdid fi Siyaq al-Tahdith* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Amman, 99-110.

As the Shadhili order was first being introduced into Jordan, Shaykh Abd al-Hafez al-Tahrawi swore the *'ahd* (pledge of loyalty) to Shaykh Yousef al-Nuwayhi in Palestine. After the *Nakba* of 1948, Shaykh al-Tahrawi moved to Jordan, first settling in the town of Karamah in the al-Aghwar area and founding a *zawiya* there. He then moved to Jabal al-Hussein refugee camp, where he settled and opened a *zawiya* as well. Thus, through the efforts of the students and *murids* of Shaykh al-Tahrawi, *zawiyas* of the Rifa'i order began to spread in several regions.<sup>286</sup>

The Qadiri order entered Jordan through students of Shaykh Muhammad Hashim al-Baghdadi, the shaykh of the Qadiri order in Palestine and Jordan and successor to Shaykh Muhammad Habiballah al-Shanqiti. Some of the students had met Shaykh al-Baghdadi through their service in the military institution of Palestine in the 1950s. Others had met him during his visits to Jordan, during which he administered to them the *'ahd* for the Qadiri order. Many of the students were permitted to start *dhikr* circles and *zawiyas*, which were later endorsed by Shaykh Ahmad al-Natsheh, the successor to Shaykh al-Baghdadi in Jerusalem (Shaykh al-Natsheh has remained in Jerusalem to this day). Shaykh al-Natsheh is the shaykh of the Qadiri order in Jordan and Palestine, and he has visited the descendants of the tariqa on various occasions.

One of the most prominent founders of the Qadiri *zawiyas* in Jordan was Shaykh 'Abd al-Halim Hamad 'Awda al-Qadiri (b. 1930) from al-Lidd District, Palestine. In his early youth, he moved to Jordan and worked as a muezzin and imam. He founded a *zawiya* in the Shuna region, where he remained active until 1966. He then moved to al-Hashmi al-Shamali, where he opened a Qadiri *zawiya*.<sup>287</sup>

The Khalwati-Qasimi-Jami'a order began spreading in Jordan when Shaykh 'Abd al-Hayy al-Qasimi settled in the city of Irbid after the *Nakba* of 1948. He founded *zawiyas* in the city of Zarqa and the al-Bariha area of the city of Irbid. Then al-Darawish Mosque and a

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 118-122.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 123-128.

*zawiya* for the order were founded in the Bayader Wadi al-Seer area. During the same period (the 1950s), Shaykh Hassan al-Sharif, the shaykh of the Khalwati-Rahmani-Jami'a order, settled in Amman and founded al-Najah National School. In the Middle Bayader Wadi al-Seer Mosque, he taught, preached and provided *taslik* (spiritual guidance and training) for the Khalwati-Jami'a-Rahmani order. The Khalwati order in Palestine had been split between the al-Sharif and al-Qawasimi families since 1928.<sup>288</sup>

The Tijani order entered Jordan first through the students of Shaykh Ali al-Daqar, and later through the students of Shaykh Muhammad Mahmud Mustafa al-Musaleh, who was known as Abu Salah al-Tijani. Shaykh al-Tijani swore the *'ahd* to Shaykh Ahmad al-Dadisi of Morocco and was authorized him in the beginning of the 1960s. Thus, Shaykh al-Tijani began to hold sessions of *dhikr* in his home in the al-Mahatta area of Amman.<sup>289</sup>

As for the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, it reached Jordan several decades later than the other orders, even though Shaykh Nazim Haqqani, the world shaykh of the Naqshbandi order, visited Jordan in the 1950s and practiced spiritual seclusion (*khalwa*) there.

The individuals described above are the most prominent men of the founding generation of tariqa-based Sufism in Jordan. They ushered in the spread of *zawiyas* in the cities of Irbid, Zarqa, and Amman. As these *zawiyas* gave birth to others, the orders increasingly propagated to other governorates.

None of the founding generation remain alive today:

- Shaykh Sa'id al-Kurdi (1890-1972)
- Shaykh al-Filali (1888-1986)

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<sup>288</sup> Interview with Husni al-Sharif. Private interview in his home in Bayader Wadi al-Seer. 19/5/2020.

<sup>289</sup> See also: Moussa, Amr. (2014). "Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi al-Urdun: Dirasa Tahliliyya Naqdiyya Muqarana"(unpublished doctoral thesis supervised by Dr. Bassam al-Amoush). The World Islamic Sciences and Education University, 90-91.

- Shaykh 'Abd al-Halim al-Kilani (1886-1968)
- Shaykh 'Abd al-Hayy al-Qasimi (1899-1962)
- Shaykh Hassan al-Sharif (1926-1984)
- Shaykh 'Abd al-Hafiz al-Tahrawi (1910-2002)
- 'Abd al-Halim al-Qadiri (1930-1998)

This generation left behind successors. During the 1980s, 1990s, and onward, new Sufi orders would reach Jordan and dozens of *zawiyas* would be opened.

## II. The Stage of Consolidation and Construction

Shaykh Hazim Abu Ghazala received his education and completed his university studies in Syria. He then returned to Jordan, where he was granted *idhn* (authorization) in the Shadhili order by Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir 'Isa and opened a *zawiya* near downtown Amman in the 1960s. Next, he established a new *zawiya* and mosque under the name Dar al-Qur'an, before moving to the Hay Nazzal area and opening a number of *zawiyas* in various regions.

Shaykh Nasir al-Khatib came to Jordan after the War of 1967. After being granted *idhn* in the Rifa'i order by Shaykh Mahmoud al-Shaqfa in Syria in 1976, he founded a *zawiya* and al-Imam al-Rawas Mosque in the Jabal al-Zuhur area of East Amman. At the same time, Shaykh 'Umar al-Sarafandi was settling in Jabal al-Nasr, after swearing the *'ahd* in the Rifa'i order to Shaykh Abi Ya'qub al-Sarafandi, then to Shaykh Hatim al-Rawi in Iraq in 1978. In the 1980s, Shaykh 'Umar al-Sarafandi established his *zawiya* in Jabal al-Nasr in Eastern Amman. Meanwhile, Shaykh Muhammad 'Adil al-Sharif of the Khalwati-Jami'a-Rahmani order opened Dar al-Hadith in al-Wehdat refugee camp. This facility teaches Qur'an reading and holds religious events such as Mawlid al-Nabi.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 53-55.



Shaykh 'Ali Zayd, known as the Blond Shaykh, hailed from Jenin, Palestine and is among those who came to Jordan following the *Nakba* of 1948. After initially settling in the city of Sahab, he relocated to al-Husayn Camp, where he met Shaykh al-Tahrawi, who authorized him in five Sufi orders. In 1979, he met Shaykh Mahmoud al-Shaqfa, who authorized him in the Rifa'i order. During the 1980s, Shaykh 'Ali Zayd opened his *zawiya* in the city of Russeifa in Zarqa Governorate.<sup>291</sup>

At the start of the 1980s, Shaykh Ahmad al-Yashruti succeeded to the Shadhili-Yashruti order in Amman after the death of his father. He then opened a *zawiya* in his home in the Fourth Circle area. Later, the *zawiya* was relocated to a new building in the Jandawil area.

At the end of the 1990s, Shaykh Nazim al-Haqqani, the world shaykh of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order, sought permission from Shaykh 'Abd al-Salam Shamsi (assistant to Shaykh 'Abdullah al-Daghistani) to relocate to Amman, where he established a presence for the Naqshbandi order. A Naqshbandi *zawiya* was opened next to Abu Sham Mosque in the Jabal Amman area.

Thus, Sufi orders took root in Jordan, *zawiyas* proliferated, and shaykhs chose successors. The most prominent features of the map of Jordanian Sufism during the consolidation and construction stage may be characterized as follows:

**The Shadhili order:** With its various branches in Jordan, this is the most widespread order in the kingdom. Some Sufis consider Jordanians to have a natural inclination towards the Shadhili tariqa. We will now consider the most significant developments in the history of this order in Jordan.

After the death of Shaykh Muhammad Sa'id al-Kurdi, who entrusted his succession to Shaykh Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri, a disagreement and schism occurred among the late shaykh's followers. Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Momani assumed one branch of the order, opening a *zawiya* and al-Junayd Mosque in al-Hayy al-Janubi, Irbid.

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 57.

He was succeeded by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim al-‘Urabi, who in turn was succeeded in 2014 by Shaykh Ahmad al-‘Ukur.

On the other hand, Shaykh al-Shaghouri appointed successors such as Shaykh Yunus Hamdan al-Da‘aja and Dr. Ahmad al-Jammal, but neither of these two remained. Shaykh al-Shaghouri also authorized the American-born Shaykh Nuh Keller, who moved from Irbid to Amman in the late 1990s. Shaykh Keller then opened a mosque and a Shadhili *zawiya* in the Hayy al-Kharabsheh area of Sports City, Amman. In Damascus, Shaykh al-Shaghouri authorized Shaykh Isma‘il, the son of Shaykh al-Kurdi to specialize in *taslik* (spiritual guidance for *murids*) from his late father’s *zawiya* and mosque in al-Sarih and Irbid refugee camp. Shaykh al-Shaghouri also authorized Shaykh ‘Abdulrahman ‘Amura, who resides in the UAE and is one of the students of Shaykh Sa‘id al-Kurdi.

Meanwhile, after the death of Shaykh Mustafa al-Filali, he was succeeded by his son Dr. Muhammad al-Filali in his mosque and *zawiya* in the Hayy al-‘Arab area of Zarqa Governorate. Additional successors included Shaykh Ahmad al-Radayda, who opened a *zawiya* in the Kafr Yuba region; Shaykh Shehadeh al-Tuberi, who established a *zawiya* in Ma‘an; and Shaykh ‘Ali al-Husayni, who founded a *zawiya* in the Shafa Badran area.

Shaykh Hazim Abu Ghazala (student of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Issa, who was among those to be initiated in the order by Shaykh Muhammad al-Hashimi al-Tilimsani) branched out by founding Shadhili-Qadiri *zawiyas* in several areas. The same is true of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Shaykh, who actively preached and proselytized after retiring from his advisory role in the Public Security Directorate at the end of the 1980s. He began preaching and instructing in al-Kaluti Mosque in the Rabia area. He was initiated into the order by Shaykh Mustafa al-Filali and became one of the well-known Sufi proselytizers in Jordan. In the 1990s he continued his religious activity and had a significant presence. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Shaykh delivered public lessons in mosques such as the Sayidi al-Kurdi and al-Kaluti Mosques.

He also gave private lessons in his home in Marka al-Shamaliya, after which he converted a home in the Hayy al-Kursi area of Amman into a *waqf* (Islamic charitable endowment) for these religious lessons.<sup>292</sup>

Among the *zawiyas* of the Shadhili-Qadiri order is that of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hadi Sammūr in Jabal Amman, near Rainbow Street. Shaykh Sammūr was authorized in the Shadhili order by Shaykh Ahmad Fathallah al-Jami, successor to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Issa.

Meanwhile, the Shadhili-Yashruti order was opening a new *zawiya* in the Jandawil area which included a library of religious science. Another notable figure is Shaykh Dr. ‘Abd al-Jalil al-‘Abadila, who was authorized in the Shadhili-Yashruti order by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman Abu Risha in the 1970s. Shaykh al-‘Abadila had previously been authorized in the Naqshbandi order by Najm al-Din al-Kurdi in the 1960s. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Jalil conducted lessons in the Shrine of the Prophet Shu‘ayb in the Balqa Governorate.<sup>293</sup>

Among the Shadhili school’s extensions into Jordan were the *murids* and successors of Shaykh Khalil al-Baraghithi, known as Abu Ibrahim. Shaykh al-Baraghithi was a resident of the city of Ramla, Palestine, and he was first granted *idhn* by Shaykh Mustafa al-Filali in Ramla while in his prime. After a period of time, the *muqaddam* Shaykh al-‘Alawi al-Shaykh al-Hilali visited Shaykh Khalil al-Baraghithi and authorized him using *al-ismul ‘azam* (the greatest of the names of God). After remaining in Ramla for some time, Shaykh al-Baraghithi traveled to al-Quds al-Sharif, where he resided and served as an assistant in al-Aqsa Mosque. He also had *al-Zawiya al-Hamra* (the Red Zawiya) which housed *faqirs* (religious ascetics who live on alms). When the Jews invaded in 1967, Shaykh al-Baraghithi relocated to Amman, Jordan. His successor, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Karim al-

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<sup>292</sup> Meeting with a *murid* in my office in the University of Jordan. 20/5/2020. See also: the official website of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Shaykh, <https://tinyurl.com/yalm93r4>

<sup>293</sup> See: Moussa, Amr. “Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi al-Urdun.” Ibid., 44. See also: the website of Dr. ‘Abd al-Jalil, <https://tinyurl.com/ycp7klhq>

Afghani, remains the current *muqaddam* of the pathway, and continues to fulfill the duties of guidance (*irshad*) and education.<sup>294</sup>

Shaykh Al-Baraghithi resided in Jordan until his death. His *zawiya* was initially in the Grand Husseini Mosque. Later, the Alawites founded another *zawiya* under Shaykh al-Baraghithi's supervision in the town of Hisban, Jordan. They also established branches of the 'Alawi *zawiya* in other locations.

Shaykh Al-Baraghithi had many successors, among the most prominent of whom are Shaykh 'Abd al-Karim al-Afghani, Sheikh Haydar Ya'qub Hamu al-Idrisi, and Shaykh Islam Muhammad al-Hindi. The 'Alawi *zawiya* is marked by its ongoing relationship with its mother lodge in Mostaganem, Algeria.<sup>295</sup>

**The Rifa'i order:** Among the students of Shaykh Mahmoud al-Shaqfa was the Shaykh Nasir al-Khatib, who became a prominent Sufi figure. He founded al-Rawas Mosque and the Rawasi *zawiya* in the Jabal al-Zuhur area of Amman. His activities expanded to the extent of establishing the channel *al-Sufiyya* as well as other institutions characterized by Sufism and proselytization. After his death, he was succeeded by his son, al-Mu'tasim.

Shaykh 'Umar al-Sarafandi's *zawiya* is located in al-Nasr Camp in Amman. There, he practiced the ritual of *darb bil-shish* and deeds considered by his followers to be supernatural wonders (*karamat*). He died some years ago, with one of his sons succeeding him.

After the death of Shaykh Ali Abu Zayd, Shaykh Mahmud Marwah has served as his successor in his mosque in Russeifa since 1997. Shaykh Marwah was authorized in five different Sufi orders, but he continued in the Rifa'i order like his shaykh 'Ali Abu Zayd. He later relocated his *zawiya* to a larger space in al-Rashid District, Russeifa.

Shaykh Dr. Sa'id Hawa moved to Jordan as a result of the events in Hama, Syria in the early 1980s. He is one of the most prom-

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<sup>294</sup> See biographical information about Shaykh al-Baraghithi on *al-Mudawwana al-'Alawiyya*, 27/12/2017: <https://tinyurl.com/ycz3u73n>

<sup>295</sup> Interview with Shakir al-Kilani, 18/6/2020.

inent shaykhs in the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to being known as a Sufi. His son, Dr. Mu'adh Sa'id Hawa, followed the path of Sufism as well, and currently teaches in the International Islamic University; Dr. Hawa also attends Shaykh al-Marwah's *hadra* each Thursday in Russeifa, teaches courses in his mosque in Sweileh District of Amman, and has a number of students and *murids*.

Our examination of the Rifa'i order continues with a look at the students of Shaykh Yusuf al-Nuwayhi. After the death of Shaykh 'Abd al-Hafiz al-Tahrawi in 2002, his son Muhammad succeeded him. There are *zawiyas* affiliated with the sons and grandsons of Shaykh Yusuf al-Nuwayhi in the area of al-Quwaysimah and Madaba refugee camp.

One of the students of Shaykh al-Tahrawi is Shaykh Faris al-Thalji al-Rifa'i in Jerash, who joined Sufi orders through more than one shaykh. He was authorized by Shaykh al-Tahrawi in the Rifa'i order in 1991, and he has a *zawiya* in Jerash as well as Baqa'a refugee camp, the town of al-Muqabalayn, and some in Morocco. He also has numerous successors who are not affiliated with any *zawiya*.<sup>296</sup>

**The Qadiri order:** This order is affiliated with Shaykh Muhammad Hashim al-Baghdadi in Jerusalem, who was later succeeded by Shaykh Ahmad Natsheh. In his *zawiya* in teal-Hashmi al-Shamali neighborhood of East Amman, Shaykh 'Abdel-Halim al-Qadiri was succeeded by his son Shaykh Muhammad 'Abdel-Halim al-Qadiri. Numerous Qadiri *zawiyas* exist in Russeifa, Zarqa, Shuna, Kerak, Irbid, and Amman to this day.<sup>297</sup>

**The Khalwati order:** In the Khalwati-Rahmani-Jami'a order, Shaykh Husni Hassan al-Sharif was appointed as the successor to his father in Jordan and Palestine. This took place in a formal ceremony in 1988. Shaykh Husni undertook the project of building a mosque, *zawiya*, madrasas, universities, and orphanages affiliated with the order. His influence reached outside of Jordan to Ghana and other nations. Within Jordan, his *zawiyas* remain in active in Irbid and Zar-

<sup>296</sup> Abu Hanieh, Hassan. *Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya*. Ibid., 118-122.

<sup>297</sup> Amr, Moussa. "Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya". Ibid., 63-64.

qa. The Bayader Wadi al-Seer area is home to al-Darawish Mosque and its accompanying *zawiya*, which are affiliated with the Khalwati-Qasimi branch. This branch expanded through institutions and educational and religious action in Palestine, particularly within the 1948 borders. A Qasimi academy has been founded in Palestine, as well as a college and a number of *zawiyas* and madrasas. Some consider the Khalwati-Qasimi order to have grown stronger in Palestine and declined in Jordan in recent years.<sup>298</sup>

**The Naqshbandi order:** the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order began to take root in Jordan through Shaykh ‘Abdul Salam Shamsi. After the shaykh’s relocation to Turkey a few years ago, he was succeeded by Shaykh Abu al-Yusr and Sitt Umm Maryam.

**The Tijani order:** Shaykh Abu Salah al-Tijani maintained sessions of *dhikr* and preaching in his home in Mahatta up until his death. Nevertheless, the Tijani order did not witness growth. Shaykh Mansur Ahmad Nasir al-Yamani was authorized in this order by Shaykh Mahmoud al-Safarani in the early 1990s. In 2009, Shaykh Ahmad Muhammad al-Tijani al-Masri appointed al-Yamani as a *muqaddam* for the Tijani order in Jordan; he was also granted written *ijaza* (license) by Shaykh Ali Bil-‘Arabi, the world caliph of the Tijani order. Al-Yamani holds *majalis* (spiritual sessions) in his home in T-barbour every Friday after the *zuhr* (afternoon) prayer.

**The Ahmadi-Badawi order:** Shaykh Dhiyab Khattab founded a *zawiya* for the Badawi order in the region of al-Yadudah. He was admitted to the Badawi order by Shaykh ‘Abdel Hafiz al-Nuwayhi, who more than one order. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Hamid al-Nuwayhi is considered responsible for the Badawi *mashrab* (brotherhood) in Jordan and Palestine.

Another of the Ahmadi-Badawi sheikhs is Dr. Muhammad Jabir al-Husni al-Ahmadi, a professor in al-Hussein Bin Talal University in Ma’an. He was authorized by his father, Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmadi, and lives in Dhiban. He holds *dhikr* sessions in his father’s *zawiya* in Gaza camp, Jerash, which is known as the Ahmadi *Zawiya*. His father,

<sup>298</sup> Abu Hanieh, Hassan. *Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya*. Ibid., 140-141.

Shaykh Jabir al-Ahmadi, was administered the *'ahd* in the Ahmadi order by Shaykh Mahmoud Abu Husnayn. Shaykh Husnayn lived in the Palestinian village of al-Batani and was also known as al-Mishlah (the nickname refers to a traditional men's cloak, and originates from the shaykh's habit of wearing trousers and a vest in both summer and winter).<sup>299</sup>

**The Kasnazani order:** This order spread and reached Jordan after the 2003 occupation of Iraq. Its shaykh, Muhammad al-Kasnazani, came to Amman in 2007, and held *hadras* (Sufi liturgies) in his home in Abdoun. His *zawiya* was relocated to Marka al-Shamaliya in 2007.<sup>300</sup>

**The Ba'Alawiyya order:** The Ba'Alawiyya order began to enter Jordan in the new millennium through the influence of the Habayib ("the Beloved of God") in Yemen. It took hold particularly among learned and academic youth. Some of the most prominent descendants of this order in Jordan are Shaykh Dr. Ahmad al-Suwwi, Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi, Shaykh Abdulgader Alharthi, and the mufti of Aqaba Governorate, Sheikh Muhammad al-Juhani.

### III. Institution-based and network-based Sufism: the younger generation

With the disappearance of the first generation and a large portion of the second, and with the passing of time since the third generation came to the fore, early signs of the fourth generation began to appear among the descendants of Sufi movements. This was the generation that consisted of the sons and grandsons of the founding generation of Sufi orders, or students thereof. Some of them remain in their youth today. Prominent names include al-Mu'tasim Nasser al-Khatib (Rifa'i-Rawasi order), Yusuf Hazim Abu Ghazaleh (Shadhili-

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<sup>299</sup> Written response from al-Sharif Hani Muhammad Jabir al-Ahmadi, son of Shaykh Ahmadi, who resides in Saudi Arabia. 5/6/2020.

Also see the Facebook page of the Ahmadi-Badawi order in Palestine: <https://tinyurl.com/y9fnndsh>

<sup>300</sup> Abu Hanieh, Hassan. *Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya*. Ibid., 126-128.

Qadiri order), the sons of Shaykh Husni al-Sharif (Khalwati-Rahmani-Jami'a), Ali Ahmad al-Yashruti (Yashruti order), and those known by the term "Neo-Sufis."

However, the orders which attract a considerable number of young people today are as follows: the Ba'Alawi order, which operates within an institution-based framework (as discussed ahead); the Rifa'i order in Shaykh Mahmud Marawah's *zawiya* in Russeifa, which attracts university and graduate students, and among whom Dr. Mu'adh Hawa enjoys a major presence; the Shadhili-Darqawi order; the *zawiya* or Shaykh Nuh Keller, in particular young people of diverse and varied nationalities; the Khalwati-Jami'a-Rahmani, which is distinguished by having high proportion of imams, preachers, and Shari'a scholars; and the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order.

### **Features of youth Sufism:**

If we take a look at the younger generation today – the fourth generation, and to a lesser extent parts of the third generation – we see that their rise, their prominence, and their role all coincide with the new millennium. This group exists in conjunction with the changes that are currently taking place in the areas of state policies on religion, whereby the state endeavors to create an environment that is Maturidi, Ash'ari, doctrinal (*madhhabi*), and Sufi. Some of the most significant features of contemporary youth Sufism are as follows.

1. First, in place of the framework of tariqa-based action, there has been a shift towards the institutional, network-based realm. Since the 1980s and 1990s, two main movements have risen to prominence in the Jordanian arena, both of which have an institutional Sufi nature: the students of Shaykh 'Abd Allah al-Harari, and the *Taba'iyyat*, (female) followers of Fadia al-Taba'a. Nevertheless, during the past decades, these groups existed at a certain distance from local Sufi orders and operated independently. This state of affairs changed when the process of transformation began within some of the orders and the younger generation, as individuals began to shift to the realm of institutional activity during the new millennium.



However, prior to this shift, in terms of traditional Sufi orders, Shaykh Husni al-Sharif became the leader of the Khalwati-Jami'a-Rahmani order and found that it was necessary to build institutions for education, proselytization, and social functions. He saw an imperative to shift from working within the *zawiya* to working externally, so he founded a number of institutions both within Jordan and beyond its borders, including an orphanage, a large madrasa, and charitable organizations. Shaykh al-Sharif also formally registered the order in the Chief Justice Department. He continues to work to expand the order's practice both inside and outside Jordan in regard to education, social functions, proselytization, and charity.

One of the most significant turning points was the opening of al-Ma'arij Institute for Islamic Shari'a Studies in 2007. The institute then expanded with the opening of several branches and the founding of diverse institutions, which was followed by the establishment of institutes dedicated to teaching Shari'a and Islamic jurisprudence. There was a particular reliance upon professors from the colleges of Shari'a in the World Islamic Sciences and Education University, such as Dr. Amjad Rashid, dean of the College of Shafi'i Jurisprudence, who founded the Madarik Training and Consultancy Institute; Dr. Salah Abu al-Haj, dean of the College of Hanafi Jurisprudence, who founded the Anwar Centre (*Markaz Anwar al-'Ulama'*); and the organization Dar al-Awwabeen, founded by Shaykh Abdulgader Alharthi.

2. "Electronic Sufism": A number of Sufi orders in Jordan have entered the world of the internet, especially social media. They have begun to share their activities and publications online. For some orders, it has been sufficient to use the internet to share their activities, particularly *dhikr* sessions, sermons, lessons and events held by their sheikhs, and introductions to the sheikhs. They have not ventured into updating or developing their content or modernizing Sufi discourse in terms of its tools, form, or content. A prominent example is the Shadhili-Momani-'Urabi order in Irbid; its adherents hold *dhikr* sessions in al-Nur Mosque in Irbid which are published on the order's websites. The order also created an online audio broadcast in

2020.<sup>301</sup> Another example is the Shadhili-Darqawi order; Shaykh Isma'īl al-Kurdi, the son of Shaykh Muhammad Sa'īd al-Kurdi and successor to Shaykh al-Shaghouri in Irbid, leads a mosque and *zawiya* near Irbid camp.<sup>302</sup> The Sayadi-Rifa'i *zawiya* in Jordan was established in Aqaba by Muhammad Sabih, who holds *dhikr* sessions and broadcasts them on social media and YouTube.<sup>303</sup>

On the other hand, there are other orders which have developed their tools and diversified the materials which they provide online. Examples include the Khalwati-Jami'a-Rahmani order, which publishes diverse content on its Facebook page: lessons, lectures, and *nashids* by a number of shaykhs and proselytizers belonging to the order.<sup>304</sup> The order also has an official website to introduce itself, its sheikhs, activities, and publications; the site offers recordings, lectures, sermons, and lessons by Shaykh Husni al-Sharif or his *murids*.<sup>305</sup>

Shaykh Fawwaz al-Tiba' is considered to be part of the younger, social media-savvy generation. He is the shaykh of the Rifa'i-Qadiri-'Aliyya order, and presents himself as such.<sup>306</sup> Another example is the Rawasi-Rifa'i order; it consists of the followers of Shaykh Nasir al-Khatib, who founded the channel *al-Sufiyya*. This channel was discontinued some years ago after the death of Shaykh Nasir. His order and his students engage in a significant amount of online activity.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>301</sup> See the order's Facebook page: <https://tinyurl.com/yayhedgp>

See also its audio broadcast via the following link: <https://tinyurl.com/y99uoruv>

<sup>302</sup> See its Facebook page: <https://tinyurl.com/yehboz4a>

<sup>303</sup> See, for example: <https://tinyurl.com/y8lo4kc7>

<sup>304</sup> See its page on social media: <https://tinyurl.com/yc4m9wa7>

<sup>305</sup> See the following website: <https://tinyurl.com/yblnpecm>

<sup>306</sup> See its Facebook page: <https://tinyurl.com/ybaw6umh>

<sup>307</sup> See the Twitter account of *al-Sufiyya* channel: <https://tinyurl.com/ybztjnws>

See also: the website of Shaykh Nasir al-Khatib, <https://tinyurl.com/yajc6ey2>

See also: the website of Dar al-Dhikr and al-Rawda al-Khatibiyya, which is supervised by al-Mu'tasim al-Khatib. He is the successor to his father, Shaykh Nasir. Link: <https://tinyurl.com/y9ld2f3y>

On the topic of institutes, al-Ma'arij Institute for Islamic Shari'a Studies represents a qualitative leap in online activity. The institute relies on the internet to transmit numerous activities, lectures, and proselytizing sessions, in addition to conferences which it holds. Similarly, Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi, the founder and director of the institute, delivers proselytization lessons in various broadcasts. He and others who are active in the institute use a modern language that connects with a general audience. Furthermore, a company was founded that specializes in artistic production.<sup>308</sup>

3. "Shari'a Sufism" and academic education: It is noticeable within the landscape of Sufism today that many in the younger generation make sure to complete an academic education. After studying shari'a, they connect it with Sufism; this phenomenon has become clear in recent years as many individuals of the younger generation have emphasized the concept of "Shari'a Sufism" (*al-tasawwuf al-shar'i*) or "shari'afied Sufism" (*al-tasawwuf al-mushar'an*). However, interest in the attainment of *'ilm* (knowledge) varies across institutes, orientations, and specializations. We find that al-Ma'arij Institute has a complete structure for religious education, starting with what is called "obligatory science" (*al-'ilm al-wajib*), and progressing through the religious sciences. This parallels the institute's attention to Sufi aspects or what is termed *tazkiya* (purification of the self). On the other hand, Shaykh Saeed Foda, Shaykh Kursi al-Imam al-Razi in the field of scholastic theology (*'ilm al-kalam*), Shaykh Hassan Saqqaf in the field of hadith studies, and all those belonging to al-Madarij Institute and the Anwar Center are interested in the field of Islamic jurisprudence – even if all of these individuals consider themselves to be part of the framework of the Ash'ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi school. Currently, we find that many who belong to this doctrine are degree holders, scholars and members of the middle class, or even the wealthy class. This indicates a major shift in the trajectory of Sufism in Jordan.

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<sup>308</sup> See the Facebook page of al-Ma'arij Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/y7ukugeb>  
 See also: al-Ma'arij Institute's YouTube channel: <https://tinyurl.com/y88t9au2>  
 See also: Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi's Twitter account,  
<https://tinyurl.com/yd4czbj>

4. Diversity in Sufi fields: the field of Sufism in Jordan is no longer restricted to traditional styles, *zawiyas*, or even Sufi orders, because today there is a new trend which is sometimes referred to in the literature as “the Neo-Sufis.” These individuals entered into Sufism from outside of the incubator of traditional orders. Some are influenced by the current wave of spiritualities and mysticism in the world. Others come to Sufism by way of the knowledge of esoteric energy (*‘ilm al-taqa*). Others are Islamists who have departed from ideological “political Islam,” in particular following the Arab Spring. Some gravitate towards traditional Sufi orders, while others search exclusively for individual meanings in Sufism. Later, authors, novelists, and singers began to enter into Sufism and offer a specialized output in some of their fields; this is the case for many Jordanian artists who perform Sufi songs.

### **Al-Ma’arij Institute as a Key Transformation**

Founded in 2007, al-Ma’arij Institute for Shari’a Studies in many ways represents a quantitative leap in the landscape of Jordanian Sufism. The institute is the product of a number of influences, which are described as follows.

The first one is that of the Ba’Alawi order, which began to have an increasingly noticeable presence in Jordan. Of particular note are the Habayib, including Shaykh Umar bin Hafiz, Shaykh al-Habib al-Jifri, and Shaykh Abu Bakar al-Mashhur. Many among the Sufi youth in Jordan began to be influenced by them, and some traveled to Yemen to study Shari’a in Dar al-Mustafa, which belongs to the Habayib. When these young people returned to Jordan, they continued to be influenced by their studies at Dar al-Mustafa and by the individuals who played an active role in that experience.

A second influence on al-Ma’arij Institute was the madrasa of Shaykh Noah al-Qudah. The shaykh’s influence on the youth generation became more profound since he was appointed Grand Mufti of the kingdom, which occurred after the General Ifta’ Department became independent from the Ministry of Awqaf. Shaykh Noah was steeped in the Syrian school, which espouses “sheikh-based Sufism”

(*tasawwuf al-mashayikh*) rather than tariqas, i.e., moving beyond tariqas in favor of openness between all varieties of Sufism.

A third influence is those among the younger generation who studied under ‘ulama’ and shaykhs over the past years. Drawing from their own experiences, they became convinced that Sufism needed to advance from the stage of traditional orders, rhetoric, and tools to the stage of new rhetoric and tools – particularly those of an institutional and network-based nature.

Al-Ma‘arij Institute was founded with the blessings of the Hayib in Yemen, Shaykh Noah al-Qudah, who offered significant moral support to the founders, and other shaykhs. Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi developed the initial idea for the institute, was a very prominent founder, and is the current director. He is joined by a number of shaykhs who bear the influence of the Ba‘Alawi order, such as Shaykh Dr. Ahmad al-Suwwi, Shaykh Dr. Muhammad al-Juhani (the Mufti of Aqaba), Islamic *nashid* artist and doctoral student Shaykh Jihad al-Kalouti. Through years of action and activity, the institute was able to attract both quantity and quality from the youth generation of Sufis, from Sufi shaykhs who teach in the institute, and from ‘ulama’ and professors specializing in shari‘a, Islamic jurisprudence, creed, and Sufism.

The great bulk of Sufi youth activity shifted to al-Ma‘arij Institute, which contains different branches of the Ash‘ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi school. Those who teach in the institute include Saeed Foda, Shaykh Nur Mustafa al-Rafati, Dr. Muhammad al-Juhani, and Dr. Ahmad Hasanat; most of them come from the General Ifta’ Department. Others include Yusuf Abu Ghazala, the son of Shaykh Hazim Abu Ghazala; Shaykh Hasan al-Saqqaf; Shaykh Isma‘il al-Kurdi; a number of professors of shari‘a; and specialists belonging to the Ash‘ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi theological school.

Over the course of thirteen years, the institute’s work expanded in a significant way, which was unprecedented for Sufism in Jordan. Eight branches were opened in four governorates: Amman, Irbid, Zarqa, and Aqaba. Furthermore, a host of other institutions are

networked with the institute, such as a publisher (Dar al-Mu‘in); a store which sells books, artwork, prayer beads, and Islamic clothing; the Qibla Institute for Family Counseling (Mu‘assasat al-Qibla li-l-Istisharat al-Usriyya); a media production company; the company Elixir for Business Solutions; and Ibrahim al-Khalil Kitchen.

The slogan of al-Ma‘arij is “Reviving the whole religion, in the whole world, together.” It offers a diverse range of specialized courses in shari‘a, including weekly general religion courses pertaining to Shari‘a and various religious sciences, as well as preparatory programs for proselytizers and preachers. Some of these entail a two-year program by which students commit to undergo two full years of graded coursework. These begin with what is termed *‘ulum al-wajib*, i.e., the necessary knowledge. Students then delve deeper and expand into Shari‘a under the tutelage of instructor shaykhs. The institute depends on a curriculum known as the science of *musnad* (a *musnad* is a collection of hadith arranged according to the Companion who transmitted them from the Prophet, PBUH). This includes studying under well-known shaykhs and receiving *ijaza* (license to transmit) for particular texts; once students completed this, they would teach the same texts to other shaykhs, thus becoming well-known shaykhs themselves in the religious and Shari‘a sciences.

In addition to periodic lectures and the sciences of Shari‘a and Islamic jurisprudence, al-Ma‘arij Institute participates in Islamic occasions by holding *dhikr* sessions on a continual basis. However, these sessions tend to involve *madih nabawi* and *qasa‘id al-burda* (songs and poems of praise for the Prophet, PBUH). These are performed in a seated position, without the standing, jumping or dancing that is found in many Sufi orders.

Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi stresses that there is real institutional action and continual planning and deliberation within the institute’s board of directors and among the founding elites. Important activities held by al-Ma‘arij Institute include the regular, biannual al-Khuwaysa Conference. It is attended by well-known shaykhs, ‘ulama’, jurists, intellectuals along with a large number of the institute’s

members and audience. Each time, religious, jurisprudential, and intellectual subjects are discussed.<sup>309</sup>

In some of its iterations, al-Khuwaysa Conference transformed into something resembling a conference of dialogue geared towards discussion, thought, and planning for the future of Sufi practice in Jordan and even outside the country. The conference is characterized by the constant presence of shaykhs from outside of Jordan. For instance, for al-Khuwaysa Festival in 2018 – one decade since al-Ma‘arij Institute was founded – it was decided that the event would transition from the local to the global level in terms of action and activity. This led expanded and strengthened of the institute’s network of relations and connections in other organizations, institutions, and Sufi movements outside of Jordan.

One of the community-based initiatives which al-Ma‘arij Institute holds annually is Rabi‘ al-Muhibbin (Lovers’ Spring), a fifteen-year-old initiative aimed at reviving the Islamic months Rabi‘ al-Awwal and Rabi‘a al-Thani each year, through sessions of prayer for the Prophet. This takes place in various governorates of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan in a range of institutions, mosques, and homes. Rabi‘ al-Muhibbin has a diverse presence, including media activity, television and radio programs, social media platforms, and community-based, youth-oriented publications and events.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> In regard to al-Khuwaysa Conference, see the following introductory video: <https://tinyurl.com/yb4xvx7b>

The term *al-Khuwaysa* comes from one of the hadiths of the Prophet (PBUH): “[...] But when you see overwhelming stinginess, desires being followed, this world being preferred [to the Hereafter], and everyone with an opinion being proud of it, then mind your own business.” Minding your own business (*al-khuwaysa bi-nifsika*) does not mean sitting at home, disinterested in public affairs, but rather identifying one’s responsibilities and fulfilling obligations within those boundaries. For example, a head of household concerns himself with matters of his family, a teacher concerns himself with his student, a ruler with his subjects, and so on. Later in the paper we will show the way in which al-Khuwaysa Conference and the ideology of Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi (the founder of al-Ma‘arij Institute) relate to the science of transition and changes.

<sup>310</sup> For more on the Rabi‘ al-Muhibbin project, see: <https://tinyurl.com/y756ewkc>

In terms of women, al-Hawra' Institute – the women's division of al-Ma'arij – participates in the same programs, including lectures, courses, and Shari'a science, in addition to women's activities. As will be described later, the institute broadened its engagement with the local community and expanded beyond the walls of their facility.<sup>311</sup>

Al Ma'arij Institute elevated Sufi practice in Jordan from the realm of tariqa-based Sufism to that of networks. Moreover, it improved the language, rhetoric, and priorities of Sufism; the framing of activities; the concern for organizing how Shari'a sciences are received; and the level of attention to Sufism itself. These factors may be what distinguishes al-Ma'arij from other Shari'a institutes that have opened in recent years – e.g., the Madarij Institute and the Anwar Centre – which specialize in Shari'a science, particularly Hanafi, Shafi'i, and Malaki jurisprudence. These institutes do not, however, devote equal attention to the subject of Sufism; though their leaders are generally Sufis; these individuals are more interested in the aspects of jurisprudential science.

The other merit of al-Ma'arij Institute is that it moved Sufi discourse from the realm of *zawiyas* to the public sphere, through a number of events such as Rabi' al-Muhibbin, al-Khuwaysa Conference, and programs through which Sufi 'ulama' visit the institute and deliver lectures. Additionally, the institute has shown as much interest in women's activities as men's. By networking with institutions and figures of Sufism around the world, particularly the Habayib in Yemen, it elevated Jordanian Sufism to the global level. It has participated in visits abroad consisting of delegations of dozens of Jordanians, and it hosts a number of students from outside of Jordan, particularly South Asians.<sup>312</sup>

The institute places emphasis on the "theory of action" (*nazarriyyat al- 'amal*) and a vision of change and reform according to what

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<sup>311</sup> See the Facebook page of al-Hawra Institute: <https://tinyurl.com/yahp6tnz>

<sup>312</sup> See the welcome ceremony for al-Ma'arij Institute's visit to India:

<https://tinyurl.com/y9axxvjr>

See also the trip to Africa that was undertaken by a delegation from the institute:

<https://tinyurl.com/yblm9fsm>



is called the science of transition and changes (*fiqh al-tahawwulat*). This brings us to an in-depth consideration of the superintendent of the institute, Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi. Although Shaykh al-Qaddoumi insists that action has been institution-wide, his individual role and influence were crucial to founding and developing the institute and defining the intellectual vision which underpins its work.

Born in 1982, Awn al-Qaddoumi belongs to the younger generation. He says of his upbringing and family: "I was raised in an educated household. My father was an economics professor with several publications on politics and economics. He completed his studies in Czechoslovakia, and from an early age I would go with him to the book association and attend different discussions and dialogues. He instilled in me a love of knowledge and culture. The same goes for my mother, a highly educated teacher. The home environment was closest to religious and social conservatism."<sup>313</sup>

Awn began religious activities at an early age, taking an interest in attending Shaykh Saleh Abu-Goura Mosque. Since age eleven (the seventh grade), he received lessons in Qu'ran and *'aqida* (creed). As a university student, he remained interested in the science of Shari'a and attended religious lessons with Shaykh Saeed Foda and Hasan al-Saqqaf. He also spent time around various figures from across the spectrum of Islamic action and made their acquaintance. He became familiar with Muslim Brotherhood and involved himself in its activities, which honed his abilities in the field of action and organizing. These experiences would come to be reflected in his path within the Muslim Brotherhood and within Sufism in general.

Awn remained interested in cultural action and the science of Shari'a, and he began to participate in a number of student activities related to these areas. He then deepened his knowledge of Sufi orders and the field of media production. He helped found Hayat, a local Islamic radio station in Jordan.

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<sup>313</sup> Interview with Shaykh Awn al-Qaddoumi held at al-Ma'arj Institute in downtown Amman, 5/4/2020.

In 2004, Awn left for Yemen, where he remained in al-Mustafa Institute for two months. He had previously met members of Yemen's al-Kaf family in Jordan; upon returning to Amman, he was marginalized and excluded from the Muslim Brotherhood as a result of his Sufi activity and the interests which had begun to influence youth in the Muslim Brotherhood. He also authored *Hassan al-Banna wa-l-Halaqa al-Mafquda* (Hassan al-Banna and the Missing Link). In this book, he carries out a close reading of the writings, literature, and trajectory of Hassan al-Banna. He affirms that al-Banna was, in essence, affiliated with tariqa-based Sufism, and that al-Banna was significantly influenced by Sufi education when the Muslim Brotherhood was founded; indeed, al-Banna was mindful of this education in founding the Brotherhood. However, over the past decades, the trajectory of the organization veered far from its origins, in the direction of Salafi ideas.<sup>314</sup>

After Shaykh Awn's return from Yemen, he deepened his relationship with Shaykh Noah al-Qudah, whom he considers to be like a godfather to him. Shaykh Noah supported him, encouraged him to carry out institutional action, helped him to develop his ideas and perspectives, and was by his side for a long time. As a result, Shaykh Awn gained a deeper knowledge of the landscape of Sufism in Jordan and strengthened his knowledge of the map of tariqa-based Sufism and sheikhs.

While it is true in a general sense that Awn was influenced by the Habayib – especially Umar bin Hafiz and Abu Bakar al-Mashhour – it is important to note Awn's own role in building a bridge for the Habayib and bringing them to Jordan. Shaykh Awn was among the first to be initiated in the Ba'Alawi order and introduce it to Jordan. He worked to strengthen the relationship with this order by coordinating with Shaykh Noah al-Qudah, Shaykh Saeed Foda, and some of his friends and associates in the order.

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<sup>314</sup> Al-Qaddoumi, Awn. (2007). *Al-Imam al-Mujaddid Hassan al-Banna wa-l-Halaqa al-Mafquda* (1<sup>st</sup>. ed.). Amman, Dar al-Razi. 101-108.

These transformations and al-Qaddoumi's fertile early experiences impacted his vision of Sufism. He injected his experience and expertise into the field of education, the early study of Shari'a, and knowledge and reading in diverse fields. His experience also influenced the field of activism with the Muslim Brotherhood, institutional action with the Habayib, and the spiritual aspect with Sufism. In 2008, all of these elements intersected in a new experiment, al-Ma'arij Institute for Islamic Shari'a Studies.

Awn's star began to rise not only in the landscapes of Sufism and the religious sciences, but even in terms of proselytization. Through his radio programs, and with his modern, hip language, he gained popularity and a good local reputation. With his activities outside of Jordan, he began to have an ample network of foreign relationships with movements, tariqas, and Sufi organizations. He participated in numerous international conferences about Sufism held in Turkey, India, Indonesia, Morocco, and others.

It is easy to observe Awn's impact on the members, leaders, and friends of al-Ma'arij Institute. This is especially true in the subject of the science of transition and changes, which influenced the Yemeni shaykh Habib Abu Bakar al-Mashhour. Shaykh Mashhour wrote the introduction to Awn's book *Maqalat fi Fiqh al-Tahawwulat* (Articles on the Jurisprudence of Transition and Changes). From this area of Islamic jurisprudence, we can see the characteristics of Awn's political vision.

In the book, Awn mentions becoming interested in this area of knowledge since an early age as a result of studying *Kitab al-Fitan wa-l-Malahim* (The Book of Trials and Fierce Battles), which discusses the apocalypse. He describes being influenced by shaykhs such as Omar Sob Laban and Abu Bakar al-Mashhour, who granted him *ijaza* (authorization) in this knowledge.<sup>315</sup>

The jurisprudence of transitions and changes refers to the jurisprudence of the signs of Judgment Day (*fiqh al-sa'a*), the jurispru-

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<sup>315</sup> Al-Qaddoumi, Awn. (2019). *Maqalat fi Fiqh al-Tahawwulat* (1st ed.). Dar al-Mu'in li-l-Nash wa-l-Tawzi'.

dence of probabilistic evidence (*fiqh al-amarat*), the knowledge of propositions (*'ilm al-qadiyya*), eschatology, etc. Awn connects this field to futurology through research, analysis, and examination of the hadiths of the Prophet and the proofs of the prophethood; these discuss what changes, transformations, great battles, and trials will occur leading up to Judgment Day. From these sources, Awn infers what will be required during each stage in order to respond to each narrative or “transition.”<sup>316</sup>

Awn derives rules and principles for dealing with the knowledge of Judgment Day’s signs. He then considers the functions of this knowledge. In an important article titled “Min al-Somala ila al-Saylama,” he analyzes *akhbar* (reports) of the Prophet regarding major trials that will transpire in al-Sham. Awn concludes that it is necessary for each person to take care of himself, not in the negative sense of spurning reform, but taking responsibility for that with which he has been entrusted and not taking sides in the conflict.<sup>317</sup>

Awn’s book focuses on key concepts related to the science of transition and changes, such as the necessity of being self-sufficient through reliance on local industries and agriculture. Awn covertly criticizes democracy, on the grounds that democracy could cause conflicts and disputes to erupt within Arab societies, creating instability and insecurity.<sup>318</sup>

Although Awn and his associates distance themselves from political action in any direct sense, their project is not altogether devoid of politics. For instance, they speak of change, reform, and public affairs.<sup>319</sup> Awn summarizes this project with two central goals: first, to renew Sufi discourse, and second, to reform Sufism from within.<sup>320</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 29-32.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 73-77. The term *saylama* is taken from a hadith of the Prophet (PBUH): “Every trial is a triviality until it is in al-Sham, for if it is in al-Sham, it is a calamity [*al-saylam*], and it is an injustice.” The term *saylam* denotes injustice, chaos, and calamity.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 84-137.

<sup>319</sup> Awn’s interest in reform in various areas is apparent through the subjects of his media activity, proselytizing, and publications related to women (e.g., his book *al-Dawr al-Mujtam’i li-l-Mar’a: Ummuhāt al-Mu’minin Namudhajan*), the family =

## Conclusion

Based on the evidence we have discussed in this paper, it can be said that Sufi orders in Jordan are heterogeneous in terms of the roles they play, the extent of their reach, and their structure and presence. Many tariqas and *zawiyas* were unable to endure over the past decades. Some became more like “family businesses,” with their only remaining connection to Sufism being the formal inheritance of the father’s or family’s name. They even lack followers, *murids*, and all other features that are fundamental to the concept of the *zawiya*.

In contrast, some orders have shown their staying power, which can be attributed to a number of factors, such as having ample financial and human resources, and more importantly, the ability of some orders to evolve and adapt in terms of their structure, roles, and presence. For example, the Khalwati-Jami’a-Rahmani tariqa is one of a very select number of tariqas which was able to reconcile the concept of the tariqa and the *zawiya* with proselytization and institutional and community-based action. It has both a domestic presence and a foreign reach.

The Yashruti-Shadhili order has persisted as well, and succession has remained within the al-Yashruti family. The order enjoys an international presence while still preserving its origins and its internal structure in Jordan. Shaykh Nuh Keller does not stray far from this model in the Shadhili-Darqawi-‘Alawi order; he has a local presence and *murids* both in Jordan and abroad. He is also considered the shaykh of the Shadhili-Darqawi order in North America. So too did the Rifa’i-Rawasi order endure and maintain its presence, and the Shadhili-Momani-‘Urabi order remained present and powerful. Meanwhile, in the *zawiya* of Shaykh Mahmud Marwah in Russeifa, the Rifa’i-Alawi order attracted well-educated members of the younger generation.

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= (*al-Bayt al-Nabawi*), young people (*Ibadan Lana*). He has also written on behavior, Sufism, and education (*Khalafat al-Insan fi al-Akwan*) and other subjects.

<sup>320</sup> 36 Interview with Awn al-Qaddoumi, *ibid*.

To some extent, the younger generation has a presence in the Naqshbandi-Haqqani order in the *zawiya* of Abu Sham in Jabal Amman, particularly involving those who were influenced by the knowledge of esoteric energy and the Neo-Sufis. The order adapted its rhetoric regarding interaction with spiritualities. However, the more powerful, effective, influential, and widespread presence has been exhibited recently by the Ba'Alawi order. It has attracted a large segment of the younger generation today, through al-Ma'arij Institute, as well as institutional, network-based action and interplay between the Habayib's domestic and foreign presence (Habib Umar bin Hafiz and Habib al-Jifri).

In concluding this section about the map of tariqa-based Sufism, two crucial issues must be addressed. The first is a change in the characteristics of Jordanian Sufism. The most significant change is the rise of the educated, academic generation, which is linked to what is termed "shari'a-based Sufism" (*al-tasawwuf al-shar'i*), coupled with the transformation of state religious policies to promote the Ash'ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi religious identity. Additionally, numerous Shari'a institutes have been founded to teach *'aqida* (creed), Islamic jurisprudence, and Sufism. We have seen the rise of an effective generation of academics who are affiliated with this school.

This development serves to reinforce the culture of Sufism in Jordan, and it breaks down cultural and psychological boundaries which had formed over past decades as the result of negative stereotyping of Sufism. The stereotype resulted from the spread of Salafism, media propaganda which associated Sufism in its entirety with myths, and even the behavior of some Sufis themselves. At the same time, disputes began to arise within the Ash'ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi school, with some envisioning more of a focus on Shari'a and Islamic jurisprudence, while others placed more importance on Ash'ari doctrine or Sufism and *tazkiya*. Today, Sufism is accepted within this school, and obstacles have been lifted from it. However, there continue to be attempts to "codify" it within strict frameworks of knowledge and dogma, which has sparked debates and reactions from Sufis. For instance, we find these incendiary disputes between Shaykh Saeed Foda – who is interested in the ideological and theological as-

pects – and a number of Sufis who are *murids* of Shaykh Nuh Keller. Foda opposes the *madhab* of *wahdat al-wujud* (Unity of Existence), while the *murids* waged vicious attacks against him on social media in support of *wahdat al-wujud* and the *madhhab* of the Greatest Shaykh, Ibn Arabi.<sup>321</sup>

These sorts of internal crises reflect a disagreement over priorities, aims, and vision. They may also be symptoms of fundamental disputes between two sides. The first is that of gnostic Sufism, which turns to tariqa-based Sufism, *zawiyas*, and esotericism, and places great importance on *dhikr* sessions and the wayfarer’s “spiritual arrival.” The other is the form of Sufism which insists upon educational, ideological, and jurisprudential aspects, working to codify Sufism within this framework. To what extent can these conflicts be contained and overcome within the Ash’ari-*madhhabi*-Sufi school in the forthcoming period? Alternately, could the conflicts cause the school to implode, putting a hard line between its various ideological, jurisprudential, and tariqa-based components? The various aspects of this question represent the most important challenges faced by Sufism in Jordan in the future.

The second matter is the emergence of institutional and network-based action, which has the potential to spread and grow more prominent during the coming period. Some Sufi orders were able to build institutions and networks at an early stage. However, this model of action may reduce the importance and influence of *zawiyas* as a framework for Sufism and tariqa-based Sufism, in favor of what may be called “supra-tariqa Sufism,” which is exemplified by al-Ma’arij Institute. Though most followers of al-Ma’arij are committed to the Ba’Alawi tariqa, the institute accommodates people from different orders, from Shadhili to Qadiri to Ash’ari scholars to jurists. They are able to teach and learn at the institute, thus mitigating a noticeable

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<sup>321</sup> These “electronic wars” can be followed on the websites of Marwan al-Katib (<https://tinyurl.com/ybh5qc8h>), Abd al-Rahman al-Sha’ar (<https://tinyurl.com/y9c25gh3>), and others who critique Dr. Saeed Foda and characterize his positions as Neo-Wahhabism cloaked in Ash’arism. In the same vein, a Facebook page has been created with the title “Al-Difa’ ‘an al-Shaykh al-Akbar” (“In Defense of the Greatest Shaykh”): <https://tinyurl.com/y8e4c9tk>

phenomenon in the Jordanian landscape: the insularity and isolation between different Sufi orders and *zawiyas*. This phenomenon has caused the landscape of Sufism to resemble separate, isolated islands: each *zawiya* operates in its own sphere without any overarching framework.

This school of “trans-tariqa Sufism” – which translates into the model of al-Ma‘arij Institute – is closest to the model of Shaykh Noah Salman al-Qudah. We have indicated the major role played by Shaykh al-Qudah over the past decades up until his death in 2010. His came from the military *ifta’* (office of the mufti), which gave him his Ash‘ari-Sufi religious identity. Religious leaders have graduated from the *ifta’* and gone on to receive leadership positions in official religious and civil institutions. Shaykh al-Qudah supported and cultivated groups of Sufi youth, and driven them to open institutions for Shari‘a and religious education. He became one of the symbols of the religious situation in Jordan, as he enjoyed credibility, popularity, and a good reputation, despite having spent his live working in the state’s military and civil religious institutions.

Though Shaykh Noah al-Qudah became a Sufi at an early age and completed his studies in Syria and Egypt, he established a new concept for Sufi religious action which is inspired by the Syrian model, also known as “shaykh-based Sufism”; this model entails focusing on Sufism without aligning with a particular Sufi order. Shaykh al-Qudah belonged to the Shadhili-Darqawi order and, during his studies in Syria, was authorized in the Khalwati order by Shaykh Muhammad al-Hashimi al-Tilimsani. However, when Shaykh Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri nominated al-Qudah to be the successor to this tariqa in Jordan, al-Qudah declined, as he felt that his position in official religious institutions precluded him from showing favoritism towards a particular Sufi order.<sup>322</sup>

“Shaykh-based Sufism” arose in the context of shaykhs of Sufi orders in Syria wanting to strengthen the foundations of Sufism and its culture and religious sciences in the face of a rising tide of Wahha-

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<sup>322</sup> Interview with Shaykh Isma‘il al-Kurdi, *ibid*.



bi Salafism. It is notable that today, the institution of the *ifta'* – which has an Ash'ari-Sufi bent – is heavily influenced by the model of its founding father, Shaykh Noah al-Qudah. The *ifta'* is also influenced by the younger generation, which shifted to institutional action and considers Shaykh al-Qudah their godfather.<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> For biographies of Shaykh Noah al-Qudah, Shehadeh al-Amri, and Shaykh Dr. Noah Salman al-Qudah, see the 6/7/2017 issue of the Jordanian newspaper *al-Ra'i*. See also: "Nuh al-Qudah.. al-Mufti al-'Askari" on al-Jazeera, 17/5/2016: <https://tinyurl.com/yc2wqfqf>

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## THE SHADHILI-YASHRUTI ORDER AND MODERNIZATION

*Dr. Wafa Ahmed Sawaftah*

I will begin my article with three points—points that may strike some as odd, but which nevertheless encapsulate my approach to this topic:

First, some of you may be surprised to see the Yashruti order paired with the word “modernization.” You may wonder: what does Sufism have to do with modernization? Most see these as contradictory paths. However, the goal of this article is to demonstrate the role that Sufism has played, and continues to play, in modernizing and developing society.

Secondly, when I tell people about *my* Sufi beliefs, they do not pretend to hide their shock, as if to say: You, a Sufi, and wearing those modern clothes?! This is because some people imagine that Sufism is necessarily linked to dervishes with their distinctive appearance. As someone once said to Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, “How can you wear such elegant clothes and call yourself a Sufi?” Abu al-Hasan replied, “Your clothes say: ‘I am poor, so please help me.’ Whereas my clothes say, ‘I am rich with God, so I have no need of you.’” Superficial appearances—especially these days—have never revealed one’s true nature, nor the essence of religion.

Thirdly, I stand against those who have cast the Shadhili-Yashruti order in an unfavorable light without any right or reason to do so. When they were not able to find sources of indisputable authenticity, these writers contented themselves with repeating dubious material produced by partisans of certain currents, or drew upon what has been written on the internet without any verification, or what the masses say in their late-night gatherings.

### The Shadhili-Yashruti Order within the Sufi Context

With the rise of Arab liberation movements, with their national or regional slants, and their prevalence in the social sphere, new generations forgot the pioneering role of the Sufi orders in guiding the enlightenment spirit towards progress and liberation. Progressive thinkers focused on the artificial conflict created between text (*nass*), reason (*'aql*), and *'irfan* (gnosis, or esoteric knowledge). This vision of Sufism should not be overgeneralized to include those Sufis who have fallen into the pit of regression, and who refuse to modernize or evolve.

Many scholars have recognized Sufism as a school that promotes modernization and development. The Shadhili order in particular has kept pace with modernizing efforts, beginning with the work of Ibn 'Ata' Allah al-Iskandari (d. 706/1307) in making connections between *tariqa*-based Sufism and mystical philosophy. These efforts were continued by Ahmad Zarruq, (d. 899/1494) who aimed to bring together Sufism and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and Muhammad al-'Arabi al-Darqawi (d. 1239/1824), who focused on the sources of asceticism, and supernatural powers (*kharq al-'adat*). More recently, we have Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti (d. 1317/1899), whose order evolved from the Shadhili order, but who modernized using a progressive approach that kept up with the changing circumstances of that time and place.

We must acknowledge that many Sufi orders were not able to achieve the necessary balance between theory and practice, and thus lost their followers. There are many Sufi shaykhs who passed through our region but did not go beyond holding *dhikr* circles (ritual ceremonies of "remembrance" of God), or inviting people to asceticism. Shaykh al-Yashruti, as will be elaborated upon further, was one of the Shadhili shaykhs who worked to move Sufism beyond (philosophical) theory and (individual) practice in order to bring these two forms of thought together in a holistic (*tariqa*-based) approach. This approach would refine Sufi philosophy on the theoretical level, while also pushing it to engage with the evolving social realities of the day. Additionally, it allowed Sufism to come up with radical solutions for

the challenges that Islam faced using a contemporary perspective that was nevertheless firmly rooted in Sufism's origins.

## 1. Shaykh al-Yashruti and His Order

Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din ibn Yashrut was born in 1208/1794<sup>324</sup> in the city of Bizerte in Tunis, to a family descended from 'Ali ibn Abu Talib.<sup>325</sup> He received his education in Bizerte before joining the Zaytuna Mosque in Tunis. He later taught in various schools in Tunis.<sup>326</sup> When he became a Sufi, he left teaching, "for his work was to love God's people."<sup>327</sup> He followed several different Sufi orders until meeting Shaykh Muhammad ibn Hamza Zhafir al-Madani<sup>328</sup>(d. 1268/1852) in Misrata, Libya, where he joined the Shadhili order, and devoted himself to serving the shaykh.<sup>329</sup>The shaykh found that al-Yashruti had spiritual aptitude in him, and so he learned the teachings of the order "until he qualified to become a *murshid* (spiritual guide).<sup>330</sup>However, after the death of the shaykh, he left North Africa, and called people to God. He continued to travel through Africa and Asia until he arrived in the Hijaz and undertook the pilgrimage, before heading to Egypt. He intended to visit al-Aqsa Mosque, but the ship ran aground between Beirut and Sidon. He finally settled in the city of Acre, after spending more than fourteen years as an itinerant preacher.<sup>331</sup>In Acre, he taught lessons at the Zaytuna Mosque, and drew hundreds of initiates (*muridin*). His first *zawiya* (Sufilodge) was built in Acre, where he worked to foster a Sufi and religious cultural milieu in the city, through study sessions (*mudhakarāt*) which he held for the *murids* every evening. Scholars of both Shari'a and *haqiqa*—that is, those who studied religious law and mystical truth

<sup>324</sup> Fatima al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haqq*, fourth edition, n.p. 1997, p. 171.

<sup>325</sup> Mustafa Naja, *Kashf al-Asrar li-Tanwir al-Afkar*, sixth edition, n.p., 1997, p.4.

<sup>326</sup> Rashid al-Nawadi, *A'lammin Bizerte*, Tunis: al-Maghrib al-'Arabi, 1971, p. 23.

<sup>327</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haqq*, p. 180.

<sup>328</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 182.-183

<sup>329</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 183.

<sup>330</sup> Abd al-Razzaq al-Baytar, *Hilyatal-Bashr fi-Tarikh al-Qarn al-Thalith 'Ashr*, Damascus: al-Majma' al-'Ilmiyy al-'Arabi, 1963, part 2, p. 1065.

<sup>331</sup> al-Yashruiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haqq*, p. 210.

alike— diligently attended his learning circles. Most notable among these was Shaykh ‘Ali al-Miri, the mufti of the Ottoman district of Acre, as well as Shaykh Muhammad ‘Ali al-Husayni, the *naqib al-ashraf* (head of the families descended from the Prophet) in Jerusalem.<sup>332</sup>

At first, Ottoman authorities were anxious about the ballooning popularity of Shaykh al-Yashruti and exiled him to Rhodes. However, the Ottomans later became less concerned and allowed him to return to what he had been doing. In fact, the Ottoman state gave the Yashruti order some of its properties, including the house of ‘Abdullah Pasha, in Acre, as well as an existing *zawiya* in Damascus (al-Baltajiyya), so that he could use them as *zawiyas* for his order.<sup>333</sup> This happened after Sultan Abdul Hamid II himself became involved with the order, as well as a large number of Turkish ministers, notables, and governors.<sup>334</sup> These included ‘Ali Reza Momtaz, chief scribe of the imperial office (*mâbeyn-i hümâyün başkatibi*), and Nazım Pasha, the director of private royal lands, among many others.<sup>335</sup>

The Yashruti order spread through both east and west Africa. Its followers have played, and continue to play, a major role in preserving Islam there today, and in countering Westernization and Christian proselytizing. In addition, Yashrutis have led the way for the renewal and reform of Sufi thought, as this article will show. The Shadhili-Yashruti order also had a significant influence on Islamic societies: the order opened Sufi lodges (*zawiyas* and *tekiyes*) in Palestine, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Brazil, Canada, the Comoros, Kenya, Uganda, Mozambique, Tanzania, and Madagascar.<sup>336</sup> Even more importantly, the education provided by the order transformed its fol-

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<sup>332</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 264-265.

<sup>333</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haqq*, p. 232.

<sup>334</sup> ‘Ali Abu Shami, *al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi al-‘Asr al-Uthmaniyy al-Muta’akhir*, dissertation. Beirut: Lebanese University, Faculty of Arts, section 1: History, 1993, p. 83; Sayyidal-Afghani, *Sabab Khala’a al-Sultan ‘Abd al-Hamid*, *Majallat al-‘Arabi*, issue 169, 1972, p. 150-157.

<sup>335</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 236-237.

<sup>336</sup> From a conversation with Shaykh Ahmad al-Yashruti, the current *shaykh* of the Yashruti order.

lowers from average individuals who might not know much about their religion, beyond the obligations and sunna, into believers who were well-educated in matters of both Sufism and shari'a.<sup>337</sup>

## 2. Modernization in the Shadhili-Yashruti Order

Shaykh 'Ali al-Yashruti, like previous shaykhs of his order, was able to embrace the age in which he lived. His adaptive, modernizing approach was nevertheless rooted in the origins of Islam, and he drew upon earlier ways of thinking in order to address contemporary challenges. He was, first and foremost, a believer that the present was better than the past. He therefore believed that a *murid* began his spiritual journey (*sayr*) and mystical awareness (*ma'rifa*) from the point where the spiritual journeys of the movement's founders had left off.<sup>338</sup> Thus, a new *murid* could draw from the knowledge of their time to build upon what the first seekers had set forth.

Shaykh al-Yashruti believed in the modernization and the differentiation of every *da'wa* and approach (*manhaj*). From the beginning, he always said: "It is not the shaykh who gives the *awrad* (prayer consisting of units of *dhikr*) to the *murid*, but rather the shaykh says: "Here you are."<sup>339</sup> He affirmed that each shaykh from each different order had a different approach. Al-Yashruti also said that Sufism had been an ascendant path grounded in spiritual work, and had to later descend in order to bring aid (*madad*) and grace (*minna*): "When the path was ascending, I made it descend. Before, it had taken the *faqir* (the 'poor one' seeking God) twenty years to smell its fragrance."<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 270.

<sup>338</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat al-Haqq: Fi al-Anfas al-'Aliyya al-Yashrutiyya al-Shadhiliyya*, edition 4, n. p. 1997, p. 279.

<sup>339</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 260.

<sup>340</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat al-Haqq*, p. 349.



### 3. Aims and Characteristics of Modernization

#### a) Expanding Understandings of the Text and Balancing Shari'a and *Haqiqah*

Shaykh al-Yashruti found Sufi heritage to be a rich source from which to derive progressive thought. The concepts of delving deeply (*ta'ammuq*) and the arcs of ascent and descent (*al-su'ud wa-l-nuzul*) on the Sufi path are reflected in Sufi understandings of religious texts, and in what they call Qur'anic *ta'wil* (esoteric interpretation).

Shaykh al-Yashruti understood Shari'a from a middle ground that brought together the material realm (*'alam al-mulk*) and the realm of dominion / imaginal realm (*'alam al-malakut*). What lay in the material realm was the speech of the Qur'an, as well as its points of articulation (*makharij*), letters, interpretation (*tafsir*), and the Prophet's hadith. The realm of dominion contained the spirit of the Qur'an (*al-dhikr*), as well as the divine word set down on the "well-preserved tablet" (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*). Those *murids* who limited their learning to the literal meaning of the religious texts therefore struggled, both in their learning and in following the commands and prohibitions. Al-Yashruti called upon those who would delve deep into the text to reach its spirit, as expressed in Surat al-Baqara: {For we have made you a just and balanced nation} (Qur'an 2:143). The deeds of the Islamic community (*umma*) were thus divided into two parts: first, what was obligatory for a servant of God, such as carrying out the commands and avoiding the prohibitions, and secondly, how one should act towards other parts of creation. Hence a middle path was proposed "where that which is God's does not impinge on the things of creation, nor does that which is of creation impinge upon the divine Truth."<sup>341</sup> Thus the *murid* is asked to strive towards greater depth, but without upsetting the balance of the middle path. This equilibrium means that neither the more manifest (*zahir*) obligations of Shari'a nor the spirituality of worship should be valued above the other. Instead, the *murid* must always draw connections between each external (*zahir*) form of worship and its meaning, be-

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<sup>341</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 434.

cause “prayer without spiritual presence (*hudur*) is like a corpse without a soul.”<sup>342</sup>

Shaykh al-Yashruti’s first efforts towards modernization took the form of broadening the concepts of Shari’a and *haqiqa* to include the relationship between people and their lives in the most expansive meaning. He came to believe that within all Shari’a rulings was “one of the treasures of mystical truth (*haqiqa*),” which could only be reached through perfecting that ruling.”<sup>343</sup> To further clarify the philosophy of al-Yashruti: he once asked one of his *murids* about how the prayer is performed. The *murid* replied: It begins with four *takbirat al-ihram* (saying Allahu Akbar four times). The shaykh said: “The four *takbirat al-ihram* are in servitude to the four names: the first, the last, the outward (*zahir*) and the inward (*batin*).” As long as we remain part of existence, by virtue of our humanity, and existence remains part of us, through spiritual Truth, then we must gather the prayer of all existence in our prayer. Existence consists of inanimate objects, plants, animals, and humanity and each of them has a form of prayer. This is why humankind prays together in a mosque. If the imam says, *Allahu Akbar*, and the one praying stands before their Lord, then they are like a mineral as they stand, neither moving on their own nor by the will of another. If the imam says *Allahu Akbar*, and the one praying bends forward, in their bending they are like plants that move by the will of others, but not of their own will. And when one prostrates themselves, they are like an animal, moving on their own and by the will of others, and together these form human prayer. In other words, in praying one brings together the prayer of all existence, not because of the specific acts of prayer, but rather through one’s complete spiritual presence (*hudur*), and full immersion in God. This is how God creates an angel called “prayer,” who praises Him, and this is why one must perform the prayer— to bring life to that angel.”<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 560.

<sup>343</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 112.

<sup>344</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 431-432.

Shaykh al-Yashruti sought to erode the division between Shari'a and *haqiqa*, and between worship and thought. All concepts of existence and being are brought together in the human person, and the person is likewise brought together in the heart. Thus, the role of creed (*'aqida*)—both Shari'a or *haqiqa*—was to purify this heart, and to achieve equilibrium between the person and existence—the person with his two halves, the material and the spiritual, and existence likewise with its two faces, the visible (*mashhud*) and the unseen (*ghaybi*). The fulfillment of the Prophet Muhammad's vision and legacy required that this perfection not be confined to a purely spiritual approach. Instead, one should work to perfect Islam in all aspects of life, as we see in the life of the Prophet.<sup>345</sup>

Shaykh al-Yashruti saw Shari'a as representing the social side of the Sufi order, as well as a framework through which to bring together as many strata of society as possible. This is because Shari'a is a system of worship as well as an established set of social laws and economic structures. Shaykh al-Yashruti did not view Shari'a as an impediment to or limitation on the behavior of Sufis. Instead, he conceptualized the Sufi ascending from the circle of manifest (*zahir*) rulings to a vaster circle, which revealed the spiritual treasures that lay beneath the surface of the Shari'a rulings. In this way, Shari'a was removed from the age-old conflict between reason and revelation (*'aql* and *naql*). In fact, transmitted and traditional knowledge (*'ilm al-naql*) offers many points of departure for reason, revelation, and spiritual tasting (*dhawq*).

Shaykh al-Yashruti focused on establishing the doctrine in the minds of his *murids*, and explained what he wanted from his followers, for he considered all of their actions to be a form of worship.<sup>346</sup> For him, this meant reaching a state of certainty, that is, a state of equilibrium between philosophy and mystical awareness (*ma'rifa*), which is the sublime goal of every positive doctrine. This was a key aim of Shaykh al-Yashruti's philosophy, since those seeking mystical

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<sup>345</sup> Su'ad al-Hakim, introduction to *Kitab al-Isra ila al-Maqam al-Asra*, Ibn 'Arabi, Beirut: Dandara, 1988, p. 10.

<sup>346</sup> *Kitab al-Isra ila al-Maqam al-Asra*, p. 311.

awareness took one of two possible directions: ascending, as a result of diligence and work (for “those who follow the Sufi path will become masters”) or else descending, if they did not initially learn the means (*asbab*) of knowing God, but rather depended upon grace (for “those who become masters will follow the Sufi path.”)<sup>347</sup>

The second form of modernization in Sufi doctrine is the focus on achieving balance in the *murid*'s life. What we can glean from the various sayings of the shaykh is that the Prophetic inheritance of mystical awareness (*ma'rifa*) is not fulfilled through one's personal labors alone, nor only through divine inspiration; it requires both in concert with each other.<sup>348</sup> In this regard, al-Yashruti focused more on the relationship between the *murid* and the Prophet Muhammad. Al-Yashruti considered the Prophet to be a force moving through time and space, via various forms that were embodied in the Prophet's heirs. Sufis are not primarily concerned with the inward (*batin*) aspect of the Prophet as *batiniyya* movements were, nor only with the external (*zahir*) element emphasized in *fiqh*.<sup>349</sup> Instead, Yashruti Sufis believe it is necessary to look at both dimensions of Muhammad, because it is this balance between the two that is key to Muhammadan Perfection (*al-kamal al-Muhammadi*).

Despite the changes and upheaval shapping around it, the Shadhili-Yashruti order preserved the line of Muhammadan Perfection, as well as maintaining the continuity and renewal of Sufi teachings, as progress and civilization required. The order was among the most important in helping modernize Sufism during the twentieth century, through rejecting the idea of unity with God in favor of unity with the Prophet.<sup>350</sup> Shaykh al-Yashruti focused on increasing reverence for the external (*zahir*) of the Muhammadan Form (*al-sura al-Muhammadiyya*). He considered the spatial existence of this form to

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<sup>347</sup> This text is taken from a Mashishiyya prayer [i.e. from the Moroccan Sufi saint 'Abd al-Salam ibn Mashish], a kind of prayer that the Yashrutis called daily devotions (*wazifa*).

<sup>348</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p.402-403.

<sup>349</sup> Su'ad al-Hakim, *'Awdat al-Wasil: Dirasat Hawla al-Insan al-Sufiyy*. Beirut: Dandara, 1994, p. 49.

<sup>350</sup> J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971, p. 106.

achieve the final *maqam* of perfection (*ihsan*), in all its social meanings—from feeding one’s brother to having compassion for the unfortunate. Meanwhile, the temporal dimension of this Muhammadan Form grants the *maqam* of divine unity (*al-tawhid*), which goes beyond all manifestations of the divine, and directs one’s contemplation to the Mover present behind all superficial manifestations of life.

Using this holistic perspective, Shaykh al-Yashruti blended his theory of the Unity of Muhammadan Witness (*wahdat al-shuhud al-muhammadi*), in its social sense, with his own understanding of the concept of Unity of Witness (*wahdat al-shuhudiyya*). Al-Yashruti interpreted the station of unity of witness in his own unique way, through treating existents (*mawjudat*) as real rather than unreal. He said, “God looks kindly upon those who are compassionate to the poor. Unity of Witness cannot be attained by any person, only the Prophets and the pure ones.”<sup>351</sup> This understanding is a major departure from what we are accustomed to regarding Sufi philosophical interpretations full of ecstatic utterances (*shath*) about the Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*).

### **b) The Modernization of Traditional Sufism<sup>352</sup>**

Shaykh al-Yashruti was concerned with preserving this distinctive, modernizing line of Sufism, and stated that Sufism should not retreat inside traditional Sufi heritage and its figures and writings, in order to avoid becoming limited by particular molds. Instead he hoped that Sufism would develop new and original articulations of reality within the bounds of the historical context, drawing on the Sufi saying, “the *faqir* is the child of his time.”<sup>353</sup> Traditional Sufism either tended toward a Sufism of miracles (*karamat*), or a philosophical Sufism of ecstatic utterances (*shathat*), as embodied in the theory of Unity of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), among others.

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<sup>351</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 295.

<sup>352</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 162.

<sup>353</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 162.

Shaykh al-Yashruti, like the Shadhili shaykhs before him, insisted that the Muhammadan path represented the ideal approach for attaining the comprehensive form of the fabric that he and the previous shaykhs of the Shadhili order aspired to. In order to fully follow in the Prophet's footsteps, and to approach Muhammadan Perfection (*al-kamal al-Muhammadi*) there had to be a new balance in the structure of relationships that brought together philosophical theory and *tariqa*-centered practice. A key feature of this process for al-Yashruti was developing a theory of mystical awareness based on a number of principles, the most important of which were:

First, inspiration (*ilham*) or insight (*basira*), which al-Muhasibi considered the third path to *ma'rifa* (mystical awareness) in order to end the conflict between the Mu'tazila ("rationalists") and the "textualists." Al-Ghazali and other Sufi jurists adopted this path, affirming that grasping the full truth required both divine unveiling (*kashf*) and spiritual tasting (*dhawq*).

Shaykh al-Yashruti rejected immersion in the philosophical meanings of *ma'rifa* and verification (*tahqiq*), and he did not want his followers to be swept up in superficial *tariqa*-based practices, namely miracles (*karamat*). Al-Yashruti said: "Do not mention miracles to me, nor spiritual awareness or verification, for I am only interested in subsistence in God (*thubut*)."<sup>354</sup> He focused on continuously striving to reach "the Muhammadan secret," (*al-sirr al-Muhammadi*) which was the knowledge of *thubut* (the truth of certainty), as the most lasting, mature, and positive form of knowledge.

Shaykh Al-Yashruti adopted a unique vision centered around the notion that divine *ma'rifa* was not a kind of aid (*madad*) that a person received from above, but rather was already present within and among people—it was just hidden from them at the beginning of their path. This fact could not be realized within the limitations of reason, but rather by knowing God through *dhawq* (spiritual tasting) and *hal* (a transitory state of spiritual enlightenment).<sup>355</sup>

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<sup>354</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 591.

<sup>355</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 168

For Shaykh al-Yashruti, the human person was the main interest of all doctrines. “The spiritual guides used to say to the *murid*: Look to yourself and to your Lord. But we simply say: Look to yourself.”<sup>356</sup> This saying of the shaykh demonstrates an important aspect of Sufi modernization, involving the process of providing aid (*imdad*) and inspiration (*ilham*) in the receptacle (*qabil*) of humanity and its spiritual preparedness. He did not invoke *ilham* so that people could act freely, or discover the hidden secrets of life, or become angels. Instead, he believed that the balance between reason and inspiration created a new kind of person, who was neither angel nor animal. This was a human being, endowed with both reason and inspiration, with both mystical awareness and love of God. This is what Shaykh al-Yashruti meant when he answered someone who praised him, saying: “Are you the sun or the moon, or are you a human being?” And he said, “I am a human being.”<sup>357</sup>

Secondly, Shaykh al-Yashruti took a moderate position regarding establishing a system of relations inside his organization, which he did on a spiritual basis that was not at odds with reason. He used reason in all matters, but not only in its mathematical and logical sense, but also in the Sufi understanding of the mind as controlled by *dhawq* and *ilham* until the mind became the “acquired intellect,” as the philosophers say.<sup>358</sup> Shaykh al-Yashruti further elucidated the powers of the mind when he demonstrated that the existing equilibrium between reason and inspiration or divine knowledge (*ilm ilahi*) was a complementary balance that gave reason space to expand, as well as greater awareness, and the ability to set off towards horizons the human heart had not yet dreamed of. He said: “Divine knowledge is absolute, and reason and perception are limited. So, if divine knowledge is stronger than either of these, they must use it as a starting point. And if these

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<sup>356</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 346.

<sup>357</sup> The person asking was Shaykh Abdel Qadir al-Homsi. See al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 265.

<sup>358</sup> Al-Farabi used the term “acquired intellect” (*‘aql mustafad*) to refer to the mind’s powers to perceive divine knowledge.

are stronger than divine knowledge, then it must be restricted by reason and perception.”<sup>359</sup>

### c) Confronting Opposition

Sufism has dealt with some strange trends and faced various challenges. The first of these is Salafism, which opposes Sufi thought as a form of *bid'a* (innovation contrary to doctrine) that deviates from the kind of Salafi consensus promoted by Wahhabism and similar schools of thought.<sup>360</sup> Secondly, Western colonialism tried to eradicate Islamic identity using various slogans and weapons, most importantly, through spreading materialist philosophy and skepticism in the minds of Muslim thinkers who desired modernization and progress.

Some historians have argued that in addition to the role that the Shadhili-Yashruti order played in spreading Islam in distant regions, it also had a significant role in Palestine and other Arab countries in defending Islamic society from the dangers of deviating from the right path, and from suspicious forms of Islamic proselytizing (*da'wa*). Such *da'wa* had a negative influence on the minds of youth and the masses at that time,<sup>361</sup> leading them towards extremism, or atheism and alienation from their values. Sufism also protected society from fragmenting into splinter groups, which the colonizers tried to use against leading families.

Thus, in order to counter the challenges of these oppositional groups, the Yashruti order became involved in different spheres of local society, including learning, knowledge (*'ilm*), and *dhikr*. In the field of *'ilm*, the order contributed to spreading knowledge and general culture, especially religious culture in local society, through the following two paths:

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<sup>359</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 162.

<sup>360</sup> Mustafa Helmi, *al-Tasawwuf fi Itijahi al-Salafiyy fi al-'Asr al-Hadith*, Alexandria: al-Da'wa, 1982, p. 194-197.

<sup>361</sup> Musa al-Kilani, *al-Harakat al-Islamiyya fi al-Urdun*, Amman: Dar al-Bashir, 1999, p. 129.



First, the shaykh would give religious lectures on Sufism for the *murids* every evening. Study circles were held in the *zawiya*, where they “read lessons from *fiqh*, hadith, *tafsir*, Sufi thought, and other areas of Shari’a and *haqiqa*. The *zawiya* at that time was like an institute of learning, and brought together many different groups, who came not only because of the Sufi path, mystical knowledge, and verification, but also in order to learn from that most holy spring.”<sup>362</sup>

It was the Sufi books, as well as books of *fiqh* and hadith, that provoked most of the discussions and debates in the meetings and sessions held by the shaykh. Shaykh ‘Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti brought together all strata of society, from the illiterate to the philosopher, and therefore he tailored the level of discourse that he used. With *murids* and ‘ulama’ of the order, since he was offering a new understanding to the learning of their predecessors, he used a style that was extremely concise. With simple *murids*, he used a simple style, and he adopted a different style for the ‘ulama. Both approaches steered clear of philosophical flights of fancy. When someone asked him about the book he was holding in his hands, he answered, “this is a book of *ma’rifa*,” and then he said, “Come, let me tell you about *ma’rifa*. *Ma’rifa* and *haqiqa* mean that you remember God with devotion, love your brother with devotion, and taste this morsel with devotion.”<sup>363</sup>

The second path was Shaykh al-Yashruti’s encouragement of learning, and sending delegations to different schools and institutes of learning. I should mention Shaykh Abdullah al-Jazzar, who performed *inshad* (religious chants) in the *zawiya* of Acre, where he first joined the order; later, he was sent by the shaykh to al-Azhar. Supporting education was considered to be part of the *zawiya*’s charitable activity (*nafaqat*), which was funded by the shaykh, in addition to some income from the *awqaf*, and gifts from *murids*.<sup>364</sup>

The scholar Zuhayr Ghanayim described the cultural and scholarly milieu that the order co-existed with. He notes that schools at that time were “few in number, and limited to some religious schools only.

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<sup>362</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haq*, p. 260

<sup>363</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 444.

<sup>364</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 250-251

The local inhabitants did not take an interest in education.”<sup>365</sup> He added that “the Sufi movements had spread, including the Shadhili movement<sup>366</sup> led by Shaykh ‘Ali al-Yashruti,”<sup>367</sup> and went on to indirectly discuss the role that the Shadhili-Yashruti order played in society, mentioning some Yashruti figures who played an important role in culture and learning at that time. For example, he mentions the role of the Ahmadiyya school and its teacher Abdullah al-Jazzar (d. 1939), in the cultural life of the city of Acre and its surrounding villages. Al-Jazzar had studied at al-Azhar before returning to Acre, where he founded the Ahmadiyya School<sup>368</sup> and joined the Yashruti order. He was later appointed as an imam and *khatib* (preacher) at the al-Jazzar mosque, and as a Shari‘a judge (qadi) and mufti in Acre at the end of the Ottoman era.<sup>369</sup> Ghanayim also mentions many other muftis and qadis, including Shaykh ‘Ali al-Miri, who was appointed to oversee the issuing of legal opinions (*ifta’*) in 1885.<sup>370</sup>

With regard to *dhikr*, the order was interested in its ceremonial form, which consisted of both individual and collective chanting (*in-shad*).<sup>371</sup> Some recall that<sup>372</sup> the people of Acre would repeat Yashruti chants at their weddings, and Josef Van Ess considered them to be the first to introduce *muwashshahat* (a poetic form) and *zajals* (oral strophic poetry) to Sufi circles in the Mashriq (the eastern Arab world).<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Zuhayr Ghanayim, *Liwa’ ‘Akka fi-‘Ahad al-Tanzimat al-‘Uthmaniyya, 1864-1918*, Beirut: *Mu’assasat al-Dirasat al-Filastiniyya*, 1999, p. 536.

<sup>366</sup> Ghanayim incorrectly refers to this as a *haraka* (movement) rather than a *tariqa* (order).

<sup>367</sup> Ghanayim, p. 301.

<sup>368</sup> Ghanayim incorrectly attributes the founding of the Ahmadiyya School to Shaykh Abdullah al-Jazzar (p. 302). However, he did help establish and taught at the school. See Mustafa al-Dabbagh, *Biladna Filastin*, Kafr Qara: al-Hada, 1991, part 7, section 2, p. 247-248.

<sup>369</sup> Ghanayim, *Liwa’ ‘Akka*, p. 302.

<sup>370</sup> Ghanayim, *Liwa’ ‘Akka*, p. 80.

<sup>371</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haq*, p. 271.

<sup>372</sup> Matta Buri and Yusuf Ahmad Shibl, *‘Akka: Turath and Dhikrayat*, second edition, Beirut: al-Hamra, 1992, p. 147.

<sup>373</sup> Josef Van Ess, *Muraja’at li-Dirasa ‘an al-Yashrutiyya*, Majallat al-Bahith (Paris), issue 1, 1980, p. 144.

### d) Countering Seclusion: The Call to Congregate Together

Another form of modernization that Shaykh al-Yashruti adopted was abridging the Sufi *maqamat* (stations). He said: "Some Sufis have multiplied the different stages and levels, and in doing so have lost *murids*. However, Shaykh al-Madani has shortened the path for us, saying "the poverty of the *faqir* is the loss of the self."<sup>374</sup> Al-Yashruti did not want his *murids* to seek the kind of seclusion that the *maqamat* imposed, in order to work towards goals that might not be achieved in this lifetime. He wanted his *murids* to go beyond the level of individual action, which had been the focus of earlier seekers, in order to become engaged in collective action. Fatima al-Yashrutiyya recounts that one of her father's followers wanted to leave his teaching position because of his advanced age, but the shaykh said to him, "Do you not know that you have high standing before God? You must be an emissary between Truth and creation."<sup>375</sup>

Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti emphasized collective striving, and that the work of the individual was to carry forward other members of their order: "This is not the time for abundant worship and *dhikr*; rather, this is the time for individual capacity."<sup>376</sup> The challenges that the *umma* faced required a new stage of Sufi struggle. Everything that a *murid* did was considered a form of worship, if it was paired with devotion to God.<sup>377</sup> The shaykh used say to his *murids*, "Eat the most delicious food, and drink the finest drink, and wear the best clothes, and sleep on the most comfortable bed, but remember God often, and do not be afraid."<sup>378</sup> In order to modernize the concept of asceticism, Shaykh al-Yashruti asked his followers to combine work with *tawwakul* (reliance on God). The social structure of the order in those areas was composed of several groups. First, the people of means, those "who worked to make a living in their towns, and would visit the shaykh, and then return home. These included those from the

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<sup>374</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, 73-74.

<sup>375</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 663.

<sup>376</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 457.

<sup>377</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 550-551.

<sup>378</sup> Ali al-Harastani, *Jawharat al-Muhibbin fi Manaqib Sayyidna wa-Mawlana al-Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti*, manuscript, p. 34.

city who worked for a living and lived nearby, and the *faqirs* who had emigrated from elsewhere to be closer to the shaykh, and found work in the city.” There were also devotees (*mutajarridun*), “who lived in the *zawiya* with the shaykh, cut off from the world.” The *zawiya* was self-sufficient through revenue from its own lands. The devotees took care of growing crops and bringing in the harvest, as well as raising livestock and other activities.<sup>379</sup>

#### 4. Challenges of Modernization

In brief, the challenges that the modernizing Shadhili-Yashruti order faced were as follows:

First, there were challenges with the authorities. The order spread through the region at a time when political conditions were sensitive. The Ottoman state was anxious about any religious or political activity among Arabs.<sup>380</sup> In particular, the Sultan was afraid of the speed with which the order had spread among the masses once it was formed, and of its capacity to attract influential segments of Turkish society to join. Nationalist opposition groups were also keeping an eye on any organizations that might detract from their potential audience, while traditional religious orders were also monitoring other orders with trepidation since they did not want to lose the people’s loyalty. Additionally, the leading families in Palestine were afraid of losing their authority and influence. Given these circumstances, there were an abundance of accusations and reports made against the order. The result of all this was that in 1864, there was a report made by the governor (*vali*) Şirvanizade Mehmet Rüşdi Paşa, saying that the shaykh was holding anti-Ottoman meetings, and so the shaykh was expelled to the island of Rhodes for about three years.<sup>381</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Rihla ila al-Haqq*, p. 251-254.

<sup>380</sup> Josef Van Ess, *Die Yasrutiya: Libanesische Miszellen, Die Welt Des Islams*, XVI, 1-4, p. 20; F. De Jong (Leiden), *The Sufi Orders in Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Palestine*, *Studia Islamica*, 1983, p. 159.

<sup>381</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 223.

Secondly, there was a certain loss of spiritual equilibrium among some of the *murids*. This was one of the most serious and direct challenges to the order, that is, that some who had joined the order later deviated from the teachings of the shaykh because they had failed to maintain the proper balance between Shari'a and *haqiqah*. Shaykh Mustafa Naja, formerly the mufti of Beirut, mentioned that Shaykh al-Yashruti wrote a letter indicating that some *murids* had only pretended to follow him, and deviated from the teachings of the order and the noble shari'a.<sup>382</sup> Josef Van Ess also presents the text of a letter showing that the shaykh expelled a number of these would-be followers from the order. A number of historians who have dealt with this incident have mixed up the deeds of these imposters<sup>383</sup> with those of his dutiful followers. Al-Baytar, although he presented the shaykh in a good light,<sup>384</sup> also wrote that there was a group of followers who became involved in reprehensible activities and sinister beliefs "and believed themselves to be the Sufis of old, leaving the circle of decency and goodness."<sup>385</sup>

Most historians of Shaykh al-Yashruti continue to repeat these false generalizations and biased accounts without any verification. Muhammad Dernaika continued to attribute some of the beliefs held by individuals to the order as a whole, even though he also cites Rashid Rida as saying: "We did not see his pupils stray, nor did we hear him or any of them speak of incarnation (*hulul*) or union with God (*itti-had*)."<sup>386</sup>

Thirdly, society rejected the modernizing ideas of the order. The ideas of the Yashruti shaykhs, and their devotional rituals, seemed strange to those accustomed to the traditions of the region and their

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<sup>382</sup> Letter in *Die Yasrutiya*, p. 92-93.

<sup>383</sup> This was the Amin al-Sha'bi group (*jama'a*), which used the order for their own purposes. See 'Umar al-Barhamji, *Jawahir al-Kunuz al-Khafiyya fi Manaqib al-Hadra al-Yashrutiyya*, manuscript, p. 22.

<sup>384</sup> 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Baytar, *Hilyat al-Bashr*, collection 2, p. 1066.

<sup>385</sup> al-Baytar, p. 1066-67.

<sup>386</sup> Muhammad Dernaika, *al-Tariqa al-Shadhiliyya wa-A'lamuha*, Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jami'iyya li-l-Dirasatwa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 1990, p. 133.

simple ways of thinking at that time. Yashrutis held *dhikr* circles with *inshad* (devotional chants) and gathered together to study the work of major Sufi thinkers like Ibn 'Arabi and al-Jili. They also allowed women to participate in their religious meetings, and to attend lessons and sessions for Sufi study. Shaykh Al-Yashruti said: "Our Sufi men allow Sufi women to sit with the men; this is only when they listen to the lessons and study. When the studying ends, they are like foreigners to each other."<sup>387</sup>

The open-minded thinking of the shaykhs led to accusations that the order was not adhering to traditions and norms. This falsehood and slander continues to be spread by some writers, without any proof, especially the idea that Sufism had long been unfamiliar to the region. As al-Yashruti said, "This knowledge had been lost for a hundred years, since the time of Shaykh al-Nabulsi."<sup>388</sup>

Ihsan al-Nimr has observed that the Shadhili-Yashruti order was renewed when Shaykh 'Ali al-Yashruti reached out to al-Nimr, and the mufti Ahmad Abu al-Huda. The order began to gather *murids* and followers in the city of Nablus and in the Jabal al-Nablus area, and they even endowed many properties to the *zawiyas*, "and the heirs became angry, and laid a trap for the order by hunting for errors committed by certain deviant members of the order, and the order was weakened and destroyed! As far as I can tell from my research and the research of others, this Sufi order was actually pure and noble, although some who previously belonged to the order had misunderstood and improperly applied its teachings."<sup>389</sup>

As for Shaykh al-Yashruti, whenever challenges mounted against him, he remained firm in defending the path and the *da'wa*. He reassured his *murids*, saying, "As long as you are within the Prophet's shari'a, do not be afraid,"<sup>390</sup> and succeeded in ensuring the continuity of the path he adopted. The shaykhs of the Shadhili-Yashruti order con-

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<sup>387</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, *Nafahat*, p. 92.

<sup>388</sup> Taha Khaz'al, *Ahadith al-Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti*, manuscript, 'Akka, 5 February 1940, p. 270.

<sup>389</sup> Ihsan al-Nimr, *Tarikh Jabl Nablus wa-l-Balqa*, Nablus: al-Nasr, 1961, part 2, p. 35.

<sup>390</sup> al-Yashrutiyya, p. 574.

tinued to make their call and influence felt until the present day, not only because of the power of the beliefs that they held, but also because the *murids* who joined were clearly attracted by specific qualities of the order compared to others. There were several factors that contributed to the successful spread of the order, most importantly:

1) Shaykh ‘Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti, and the shaykhs who came after him, relied upon spiritual inspiration (*ilhamat*), rather than preparation through religious learning or reason. He did not focus on preparing lessons or producing writings, but rather on giving lectures and lessons by which he could reach *murids* from all religious and cultural backgrounds. The shaykhs who came after him continued to follow this style. This demonstrates the strength of the *da‘wa* in the order, and of its adaptive and progressive thinking that later shaykhs continued to maintain until the present day.<sup>391</sup>

2) The centralization of the shaykhs and their commitment to assuming responsibility for the order and managing its affairs, since the earliest days after assuming leadership from the founding shaykh: Shaykh ‘Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti was succeeded by his son Shaykh Ibrahim al-Yashruti (d.1928), and then his son after him Shaykh Mohammad al-Hadi al-Yashruti (d.1980), followed by his son, the current Shaykh Ahmad al-Yashruti. Each of these shaykhs preserved the foundations of the teachings of the order, as passed down to them by their predecessor. This made it possible to maintain the unity of thought and the social cohesion of the order. Ahmad al-Yashruti also mentioned in an interview that “the order had one structure and one shaykh, from whom different teachings and directives were issued to all the different *murids* in the world. This is what achieved the coordination of rituals and teachings.”<sup>392</sup>

3) The path of modernization adopted by the shaykhs of the order was adapted to the circumstances of each time and place, and what needed to evolve and progress, while also preserving the roots of Sufism, as this article has demonstrated.

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<sup>391</sup> F. De Jong (Leiden), *The Sufi Orders*, p. 161.

<sup>392</sup> Mohammed al-Suwaidan, *Al-Sufiyyun al-Judud (Tahqiq)*, Sahifat al-Urdunn, Amman, 26 February 1996.

I will conclude this article with the words of Dr. Su'ad al-Hakim: "The thinker is only as present as he is engaged in the problems of his time. Sufism's time is different than philosophy's time, and Sufi society is different from other kinds of society."<sup>393</sup> Shaykh 'Ali Nur al-Din al-Yashruti wanted his order to be known for taking a middle ground, and occupying a place between East and West, between authenticity and modernization, and even between *'irfan* (gnosis) and the traditional *tariqa* structure.

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<sup>393</sup> Su'ad al-Hakim, *Ibn 'Arabi wa- Mawlid Lughah Jadida*, Beirut: Dandara, 1991, p. 37.





# CHANGES IN YOUTH RELIGIOSITY: INDIVIDUALIST SPIRITUAL TENDENCIES

*Hamzeh Yassin*

## **Introduction**

While various topics pertaining to religion have attracted great interest among researchers and thinkers in the Arab world, there has not been enough attention paid to the subject of religiosity, despite the fact that it is highly relevant to people's lived experiences, and preoccupies many in the younger generation in particular. This academic neglect of religiosity leaves the field in a hazy state that is unable to come to grips with modern changes.

Though the media focuses on "terrorism" and the radicalization of young people, other new forms of religiosity have emerged on today's scene which should not be disregarded. Younger generations are turning toward what might be termed "individualistic religiosity" due to a crisis in their relationship to the general state of religion. This trend is characterized by individualism for numerous reasons, including the following:

- It takes shape independently from prevailing collectivist forms of religion such as Salafism, Haraki Salafism, and traditional Sufism.
- It seeks independence from the communal religiosity in which individuals were raised. This involves constantly questioning social values and traditions and seeking answers which are more autonomous and which respond better to the needs of the individual.
- Religious discourse is facing a crisis of confidence which drives young people toward other forms of knowledge. They may achieve this by engaging with Western intellectual output, searching for spiritual resources, or forming ideas to suit their individual needs.

This paper presents the results of a study conducted by the author in 2017 for his master's degree in sociology,<sup>394</sup> which examined the shift in youth religiosity from a collectivist to an individualistic nature. The paper analyzes the features of this new form of religiosity, the reasons behind the shift, and how it has produced patterns of spiritual inclinations.

## Methodology

The study's objective was to explore and interpret the shift in youth religiosity, how individuals make sense of the world around them, and what factors influence their viewpoints. Therefore, the study employed a qualitative methodology with semi-structured interviews involving both open and closed questions. The study population consisted of Facebook-using residents of Amman, Jordan between 18 and 30 years of age who were formerly affiliated with collectivist religiosity, but whose religious views had since become more individualistic. Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling, and the researcher communicated with them through private messages on Facebook. Of the 56 participants, 28 were male and 28 were female.

## Theoretical Framework

In the social sciences, a distinction is made between religion and religiosity. For example, Georg Simmel considered religion to be the vital transcendental impulse, while religiosity is its social manifestation. Thus, man by his nature tends to formulate his own religious views, which is what causes religion to be manifested socially in the form of religiosity.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>394</sup> Hamzeh, Yaseen (2017). "Al-Taghayyur fi Tadayyun al-Shabab min Mustakhdimi Mawaqi'a al-Tawasul al-Ijtima'i fi Madinat 'Amman: al-Faysbuk Namudhajan" (master's thesis). University of Jordan, Jordan.

<sup>395</sup> Acquaviva, Sabino and Enzo Pac (2011). *Ilm al-Ijtima' al-Dini*. Abu Dhabi: Dar Kalima, 63.

Charles Glock characterized religion as a complete system of responses, motivators, and strategies which guide individuals and communities through life. Through religiosity, social actors express religion, which becomes realized and empirically testable.<sup>396</sup>

Studies indicate that religiosity is not one-dimensional, but rather manifests in people's lives in diverse ways.<sup>397</sup> That is, the meaning of religion depends on the person, movement, or community, in addition to varying across social and cultural contexts. It also depends on a person's psychological makeup and particular interpretation of religion. Thus, both small and large-scale social changes can affect religiosity.<sup>398</sup>

### **Collectivist and Individual Religiosity**

The shift from collectivist to individualistic religiosity occurs when there is conflict or tension between an individual's religiosity and organized or community forms of religiosity. This often happens in modern societies as a result of growing individualism. It may occur as a backlash or rebellion against socialization, which is the process by which individuals learn the social roles ascribed to them and thus identify with the community and live up to societal expectations. Socialization ultimately produces a form of social identity that ensures commitment to and compliance with social norms. It achieves this through reinforcements and material and symbolic incentives that motivate the individual to comply, while inflicting punishments when norms are violated.

People's religiosity may change in response to punishment, as they rebel and reject social frameworks perceived as oppressive. In other cases, they may feel that the incentives offered by society are

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 70-71. N.B. Charles Glock defines five dimensions of religiosity: belief, ritual practice, knowledge, experience, and belonging.

<sup>397</sup> Kucukcan, Talip (2000). "Can Religiosity Be Measured? Dimensions of Religious Commitment: Theories Revisited" (article). Theology Faculty, Uludag University, 9(9), 1.

<sup>398</sup> Giddens, Anthony (2005). *Ilm al-Ijtima'*. Beirut: al-Munazzama al-'Arabiyya li-l-Tarjama, 580-588.

inadequate, or find that society fails to meet their individual and psychosocial needs. In short, people are driven to abandon collectivist religiosity when it ceases to meet their needs.<sup>399</sup>

The French researcher Olivier Roy expressed how the absence or weakness of socio-religious incubators contributes to the formation of individualistic religiosity. He saw this as a primary reason why people shift from collectivist religious practice to form religious perspectives based on their own wants, needs, and identity instead of those of a community.<sup>400</sup>

Thomas Luckmann distinguished between institutional and non-institutional forms of religion as part of his analysis of the forms of religion that are emerging in modern societies.<sup>401</sup> He contended that modern societies are witnessing the growth of non-institutional, individualistic forms of religiosity which arise outside of collectivist institutions such as churches. These forms seek to develop their own religious insights and seek out new spiritual resources beyond the framework of Christianity.

Generally, there is a degree of tension between individualistic religiosity and its organized, collectivist counterpart. The growing individualism in modern societies alienates people from any communities which encroach upon their freedom of choice. This puts people in a deadlock with various social dictates regarding religious and spiritual matters.<sup>402</sup> People start to define religion to their liking and disregard the authority of religious groups and religious rhetoric. Individualistic religiosity not only forms independently from these sources of authority, but rejects their role in the development of an individual's ideas, preferring instead to continually affirm personal responsibility and freedom.

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<sup>399</sup> Furseth, Inger and Pal Repstad (2006). *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion*. England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 114.

<sup>400</sup> Roy, Olivier (2016). *'Awlamat al-Islam* (2nd edition). Beirut: Daris al-Saqi, 86-93.

<sup>401</sup> Luckmann, Thomas (1967). *The Invisible Religion*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 52.

<sup>402</sup> Furseth, Inger and Pal Repstad (2006). 111.

## Douglas's Theory of Social Change

Given that the shift from collectivist to individualistic religiosity follows from social changes, it is essentially a shift in social patterns. (The term "social pattern" is used here to denote a way of life, as distinguished by the nature of the interpersonal relationships and social obligations that accompany it.) The fundamental question posed by the sociology of religion is: what are the social conditions and contexts that bring about particular forms of religiosity?<sup>403</sup>

Mary Douglas's Grid/Group Theory proves important for addressing this question. The theory elucidates how the individual's thoughts, beliefs and worldviews are affected by social patterns and the degree of interpersonal solidarity.<sup>404</sup> Douglas represented the patterns using two axes which influence social structure: group and grid.<sup>405</sup>

On the horizontal axis, the "group" variable expresses the degree of social solidarity, how individuals define themselves, and the extent to which they set personal boundaries. It is a measure of the strength of the community and the robustness of its social bonds. A high group value corresponds to contexts in which individuals are immersed in their communities through work, kinship, marriage, intellectual milieu, and other means. Conversely, a low value denotes that social bonds are more fragile.

On the vertical axis, the "grid" variable refers to the extent of rules and norms governing social interactions. At the upper limit of the axis, there are clear standards which govern individuals' social roles and add order to life. At the lower limit, these standards and rules recede, and there is freedom and individualism instead of control. In other words, the grid variable shows the amount of latitude

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<sup>403</sup> Spickard, James (1989). "A Guide to Mary Douglas's Three Versions of Grid/Group Theory". *Sociological Analysis*, 50(2), 151-170.

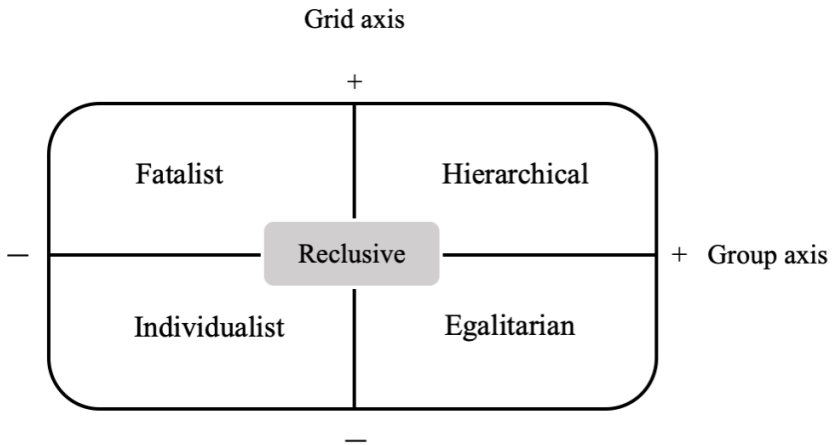
<sup>404</sup> Douglas, Mary (1996). *Natural Symbols* (2nd edition). New York: Routledge, xviii.

<sup>405</sup> Douglas, Mary (1982). *Cultural Bias*. London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 7.

for personal choices and the extent to which individuals are categorized.

These axes yield five different social patterns (also known as “cultural types”): egalitarianism, hierarchism, individualism, fatalism, and reclusivism.<sup>406</sup> Figure 1 shows Douglas’ five patterns.

*Figure 1.* The five patterns in Mary Douglas’s theory. This paper will focus on the hierarchical and individualistic patterns.



### **The Hierarchical Pattern: Strong Group Feeling and Strong Grid**

Social practices in this pattern are both connected to and constrained by the community in which people live. If a person builds relationships with individuals or groups outside the community, the community’s power of regulation weakens.<sup>407</sup> Individual behavior is considered both a representation and an expression of the community. There are clearly defined social roles for the individual, resulting in a high level of organization and classification. Interpersonal rela-

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>407</sup> Douglas (1982). 20.

tionships and interactions between the sexes are governed according to social norms and regulations. Individuals are given duties in order to ensure compliance, and failure to fulfill them is punished. In some cases, such punishments may be the reason why individuals retreat from their responsibilities.

The preservation of this pattern largely depends on whether the community is able to maintain a body of exclusive knowledge and prevent the entry of people and ideas from outside the community. Otherwise, these stimuli would promote open-mindedness to outside ideas and undermine the structure of the community and its influence.

### **The Individualistic Pattern: Weak Group Feeling and Weak Grid**

This pattern is characterized by competitiveness, individual autonomy, and the absence of external limits on individuals' social behavior. All norms are negotiable, replaceable, subjective, and up for discussion.<sup>408</sup>

Interpersonal relationships are marked by a lack of clarity, but individuals have the ability to interact with each other freely. This environment can be compared to the free market: like the acquisition of diverse assets, making acquaintances is easy and social interaction with the Other is possible (albeit that diversity is not without its challenges). Due to this pattern's weak grid, individuals have a range of options, and there is great emphasis on the principle of self-actualization. This leads to uncertainty and sows doubts about the fundamental principles found in high grid patterns. Furthermore, the decentralized quality of this cultural pattern means that each individual becomes a focal point in the world.

It should not be concluded that a given pattern is positive or negative. Rather, each pattern has its own positive and negative aspects, with certain trade-offs. Additionally, a society may encompass

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 21.



multiple patterns. For example, it may hew closest to the hierarchical pattern but have certain strata or social circles that exhibit individualism. Thus, the patterns are locked in a social struggle of sorts, with changes on the individual level reflecting changes and dialectics within the social patterns.<sup>409</sup> This paper focuses on the individualistic and hierarchical patterns as they reflect the differences between individualistic and collectivist religiosity.

Douglas noted that the individualistic pattern comes into conflict with collectivism because it provides new opportunities for those who leave collectivism behind. Adel Rahoma contended that individualism manifests in individuals' actions and the patterns of their day-to-day social presence: since it is governed by the particularities of its contexts, each setting produces a particular form of the individual and individualism.<sup>410</sup>

Individualism is considered one of the core elements of modernity. It is associated with the gradual erosion of traditional community-based entities, which are replaced by a worldview rooted in the personal value and rights of the individual. In this new system, individual autonomy is not to be curtailed by any collectivist framework; instead, people are seen as becoming emancipated from the dominion of collectivist entities. Individualism does not impose itself on varied local environments and social realities, but instead adapts to them in order to achieve maximum gains. Among its numerous manifestations is in the family setting, where it alters individuals' notions about family and leads them to renounce their expected social roles. Most pertinent to the topic of this paper, individualism can also take the shape of a youth religiosity which focuses on freedom of choice and the development of personal religious perspectives without regard for tradition or inherited beliefs.<sup>411</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Mamadouh, Virginie (1999). "Grid-group Cultural Theory". *Geojournal*, 47(3), 395-409.

<sup>410</sup> Rahoma, Adel (2010). "Tanshi'at al-Hawiyat al-Fardiyya 'ind al-Shabab 'abr al-Fada'at al-Ittisiyya w-al-Ma'lumatiyya". *Idafat*, (9), 125.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 126-131.

In the context of this study, social media sites exemplify the individualistic social pattern. The spaces provided by the internet represent what Darin Barney termed a “network society,” which comprises a distributed network of “nodes” (e.g., people or institutions) that is connected by multiple, cross-cutting ties.<sup>412</sup> Such networks vary according to parameters such as being centralized versus decentralized, and hierarchical versus horizontal.<sup>413</sup>

Networks give people the ability to build an identity and mold it as desired. Furthermore, online communities of young people foster a new form of socialization that is based on individual choices and self-invention, in contrast to traditional socialization.<sup>414</sup> The significance of these networks is that they decouple socialization from the community and place it in the hands of the individual instead, i.e. the individual socializes himself. Social media sites have been termed “virtual communities” in reference to aspects like users’ ability to divorce themselves from their real-world social lives and inhabit a new social setting. Thus, traditional social relations break down and are replaced with online relationships in a space where one can rebel and feel liberated.<sup>415</sup>

A number of theoretical works have addressed the intersections between social media and changes in religiosity. For instance, Paul McClure identified ways in which social media sites have impacted religiosity in the United States. His study “Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age” began by observing that social media platforms have become an open space for ideas, encouraging participation and the exchange of information.<sup>416</sup> McClure focused on the subject of faith and religious beliefs, noting that social media sites expose users to unfamiliar ideas and cultures which threaten to subvert and re-

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<sup>412</sup> Barney, Darin (2015). *Al-Mujtama’ al-Shabaki*, Beirut: al-Markaz al-‘Arabi li-l-Abhath wa Dirasat al-Siyasat, p. 12.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>415</sup> Zaki, Walid Rashad (2009). “Mujtama’ Iftiradi.. Nahwa Muqariba li-l-Mafhum”. *Majallat al-Dimuqratiyya* (Wikalat al-Ahram), 9, 34, 56-57.

<sup>416</sup> McClure, Paul (2016). “Faith and Facebook in a Pluralistic Age”. *Sociological Perspectives*, 1(17), 1.

place the beliefs they grew up with. His study found that social media users were 49% more likely to be inclined to pick and choose among religious beliefs, even in contradiction to what they were taught growing up.<sup>417</sup> Furthermore, users were 80% more likely to show an inclination toward practicing religions and spiritualities different from what they grew up with.<sup>418</sup>

Other studies similarly conclude that the internet and social media allow people to be exposed to a plurality of ideas, perspectives and interpretations of religion which differ from their upbringing. In contrast to the societies in which users live, social media sites provide an open space in which there is relative freedom to publish and express opposing views.<sup>419</sup>

## Results

This section presents a summary of the findings of field interviews with young people who have changed their pattern of religiosity from a collectivist religiosity to an individualist religiosity.

The results of the study reveal a striking new trend in the way that this segment of the younger generation engages with religiosity and religious ideas. Respondents began to see a system that was accepting of new ideas and change, as well as being open to interpretation by people of different opinions and perspectives. In contrast, their former religiosity, which was traditional and collectivist, only allowed them to interact with religion as a closed system of ideas.

Interviewees reported becoming more amenable to discussing and questioning their religious convictions, though most added that there are limits to this. All respondents said that they show willingness to change their ideas and convictions in regard to social and personal matters. Examples of these issues include rules imposed on them by religious restrictions and obligations; political ideas and

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>419</sup> Larsson, Goran (2007). *Religious Communities on the Internet*. Uppsala: Swedish Science Press.

perspectives from their upbringing; and the way of life associated with collectivist religiosity. The shift was not so drastic as to affect matters related to faith itself, as respondents affirmed being comfortable with their belief in God. However, a small segment of participants expressed that there were no limits to the interrogation of their former beliefs and ideas. Additionally, respondents said that while they did not used to accept people with different ideas, they became more accepting of the Other and more flexible in interactions with people of different viewpoints.

One of the study's most notable conclusions deals with participants' responses as to whether their religiosity is rooted in commitment to the rules of a particular community, or whether it is a matter of individual choice. All respondents described that they shifted towards a more individualistic relationship with religion and no longer adhered to the collectivist religiosity of their past. They also grew apart from religious discourse and no longer preferred to listen to it. The most frequently cited reasons for this shift were the shaykhs' and 'ulema's negative way of dealing with reality, particularly their weak responses to the political situation; a gap between them and the participants; and religious discourse that offered only hollow answers and was out of touch with the modern age.

### **Position on Previous Religiosity**

A number of interrelated factors drove respondents from a collectivist to an individualist type of religiosity – not just one factor was at play. These include objections to the former's substandard ideas, which were at odds with intellectual changes experienced by the participants. Approximately half of the interviewees said that they became unable to tolerate the restrictions placed on them by collectivist religiosity. To a lesser extent, some cited its exclusionary nature and closedmindedness. Some also identified that exposure to books and various intellectual resources led to the change.

Interviewees were asked to elaborate on their objections to collectivist religiosity, which revealed further motivators for the shift. Some responses were the same as to the previous question,

such as restrictions and closed-mindedness, while other responses involved their rejection of the intellectual guardianship it imposed on the individual; its lack of rational thought; an objectionable stance regarding women; the mixing of social customs with religion; and an emphasis on outer appearances rather than substantive issues.

### **Behavioral Changes**

One of the most striking outcomes is that the overwhelming majority of respondents observed that the shift in religiosity was followed by changes in their social lives, including in their relationship with the opposite sex. For instance, they became more open-minded and began to choose friends differently. Some broadened their personal relationships beyond the confines of the past, regardless of their new friends' worldviews. Others sought out friends who shared their new ideas and were raising the same questions.

### **The Impact of Facebook**

Respondents considered Facebook a space which presents new possibilities that were not available before. When asked to elaborate, the majority said that Facebook enables the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives that they could only access through the site. They claimed that their immediate environment did not provide such opportunities to encounter new and different ideas. They also mentioned that Facebook allows them to circumvent restrictions that were imposed upon them, such as not being able to communicate with the opposite sex. A small segment reported that Facebook gives them a venue in which to express themselves and their ideas, whereas they found no such receptiveness in their former, collectivist religiosity. Others mentioned that Facebook acquaints them with unfamiliar ways of life.

Responses were divided regarding the extent to which Facebook played a role in the shift in religiosity. Some attributed a major role to it, others described it as a contributing factor, and others said it did not play no role.

## **The New Form of Religiosity**

Participants identified essential features of the new form of religiosity, in particular personal autonomy and intellectual freedom, which underscores the form's individualistic character. Half of those interviewed emphasized the moral dimension of religion, open-mindedness, acceptance of the other, an emphasis on the essence of religion, and the importance of peace of mind. Particularly relevant to the topic of this paper is the fact that more than half of the interviewees said that their new kind of religiosity focused on the spiritual dimension of religion and the goal of forming a personal relationship with God.

Having reviewed the results of the study, it is possible to more systematically characterize the individualistic religiosity which these young people represent in contrast to their former collectivist religiosity. The table below summarizes traits mentioned by most or all of the interviewees. There were only trivial variations in responses regarding themes listed in the table.

*Table 28. Prominent features of the shift from collectivist to individualistic religiosity.*

	<b>Former, collectivist religiosity</b>	<b>New, individualistic religiosity</b>
1	A closed system of ideas	An open system of ideas
2	Closed to new ideas	Open to new ideas
3	Closed off to contrary ideas; aversion to the Other	Open to contrary ideas; acceptance of the Other
4	Falling back on set ideas	Learning about new ideas through Facebook and similar outlets
5	Religiosity which depends on the community	Religiosity which depends on the individual and his or her choices
6	Group-defined ideas and beliefs	Individual-defined ideas and beliefs
7	Interest in religious rhetoric and the 'ulama'	Loss of trust in religious rhetoric and the 'ulama'
8	Social and personal restrictions on daily life	Rejection of restrictions on the individual
9	Closed off to communication with the opposite sex	Open to the opposite sex
10	Constraints on personal relationships and friendships	Change and expansion of personal relationships

### **Patterns of Change**

Considering these common factors, the study revealed four distinct patterns of change in regard to youth religiosity. These may be categorized according to varying degrees and directions of change:

- **Pattern 1:** Individuals who settle comfortably in their new religiosity. They preserve the basic character of their spiritual, intellectual, and personal relationship to religion, but within an individua-

listic framework. These individuals gave confident responses which underscored their commitment to their newly-adopted ideas.

- Pattern 2: Individuals who remain in a state of anxiety and have yet to fully define their religious preferences. They have not arrived at decisions regarding the intellectual and practical aspects of their new religiosity, as evidenced by the state of instability or even anxiety which they reported experiencing. In this pattern, individuals' uncertainty leads them to question their ideas without limit. They may even question issues that are considered to be the foundations of religion.

- Pattern 3: Individuals who do not have clear viewpoints about their new religiosity. Rather, they have reached a state of indifference and apathy about making suitable choices in regard to religion and living in a way that engenders peace and satisfaction. They suffer fatigue from continuously searching in vain.

- Pattern 4: Individuals who have decided to compartmentalize their lives in order to keep religion separate from the personal, social, and intellectual dimensions. They no longer turn to religion for guidance in these aspects of their lives. Instead, they have begun to deviate from religion, keeping their attention within the confines of their personal experiences.

It should be noted that the first and second patterns represent the majority of the respondents, while the third and fourth only correspond to a small segment.

### **The First Pattern and Its Connection with Spirituality**

Following our review of the results of the study and the four patterns of youth religiosity identified above, we will now turn to the instances of youth religiosity that express spiritual leanings. These individuals who showed spiritual leanings belonged to the first of the patterns detailed above, that of stability. This is significant considering the first pattern's connection with religion and lack of stress regarding religious ideas. Such individuals adopted religious view-



points without anxiety or hesitation, which allowed a spiritual orientation to come to the fore.

Half of the interviewees (all of whom fit the first pattern) described the spiritual dimension as the most important aspect of their new religiosity, while also emphasizing building a personal relationship with God. These two components are at the heart of spirituality and Sufism.

However, it is important to understand these spiritual leanings as stemming from a context of individualistic religiosity and individual desires. This is in contrast to, say, *tariqas* (traditional Sufi orders), which possess a spiritual orientation but are fundamentally committed to a collectivist vision. Thus, the individualistic religiosity is not confined to a particular conception of spirituality; its openness to diverse ideas allows it to draw from a wide range of sources.

The inclination towards spirituality does not necessarily mean fully reconciling the individualistic framework with, for instance, the legacy of Sufism. However, an individual enjoys freedom of choice without having to commit to the vision of any particular group, and is thus able to rely on a number of traditional sources. Following the completion of the study, the author continued communicating with some participants who expressed spiritual leanings and agreed to form a study group for the Sufi text *al-Hikam al-'Ata'iyya* by Ibn 'Ata' God al-Iskandari. They were attracted to this book as it provided a conception of the kind of spirituality that they had in mind. *'Thya' 'Ulum al-Din* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali was another text considered in these meetings, which were similar to discussion circles. This shows the potential for reviving texts regarding *tazkiya* (purification of the self) by mining them for a modern model of spirituality.

The desire to form a personal relationship with God is central to spirituality and Sufism specifically. Sufism has always sought to achieve this through *mahabba* (love of God), *ma'rifa* (direct knowledge of God), and communication with God.<sup>420</sup> Indeed, in *Minhaj al-*

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<sup>420</sup> Schimmel, Annemarie. "al-'Ab'ad al-Sufiyya fi al-'Islam wa Tarikh al-Tasawwuf". Baghdad: Manshurat al-Jamal, 24.

'*Abidin*, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali describes *ma'rifa* as the beginning of the Sufi path of *suluk* ("spiritual wayfaring") and the first step to *tazkiya*.<sup>421</sup>

There are important implications of the fact that this segment of the younger generation is gravitating toward the spiritual dimension of religion as a key component of their new religiosity. As the present study indicates, this trend is the consequence of young people leaving behind the collectivist system of religiosity for want of a spiritual dimension. This points to the dysfunction of mainstream forms of religiosity, as a result of which this segment of the youth is suffering from a spiritual drought.

Such a conclusion is supported by Éric Geoffroy, who critiqued mainstream forms of religiosity as having lost their spiritual luster.<sup>422</sup> This puts them at risk of decline amidst changes in the modern world, and leaves them unable to respond to the landscape of tomorrow's world.

In light of widespread consumerist globalization and spiritual drought, spirituality has enjoyed a growth in popularity. The West has seen the emergence of what are known as "new spiritualities." However, this movement is not founded on the belief in God, does not offer tools with which to confront and critique the soul's ills, and is thus a "secular spirituality."<sup>423</sup> Geoffroy described these beliefs as focusing on the flourishing of one's individual personality and achieving happiness, rather than any relationship with God.<sup>424</sup> He accused new spirituality of refusing to scrutinize the ego prior to embarking on the spiritual path. On the other hand, examination of the ego is an integral part of Sufi spirituality.

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<sup>421</sup> Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Minhaj al-'Abidin*. Beirut: Dar al-Basha'ir al-Islamiyya, 70.

<sup>422</sup> Geoffroy, Éric. *al-Mustaqbil al-Ruhani li-l-Islam*. Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Tarjama, 137.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>424</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

Flanagan and Jupp's *A Sociology of Spirituality* emphasized that spirituality in the West arises outside of religion.<sup>425</sup> In contrast, the present paper has described a state of spiritual religiosity which is gaining traction; it exists within religion, but offers a new and different perspective. Scholars have stressed that the study of spirituality must take into consideration cultural contexts such as these.<sup>426</sup> Future studies should seek to establish a clearer picture of spirituality as it is emerging within the framework of individualistic religiosity in the Arab and Islamic world.

Considering the extent of spiritual leanings in the world, the question that presents itself is: How can the Islamic world respond? Can it offer a spiritual model capable of lifting people out of their state of alienation, materialism, and "clinging to earthly life"? Can it hold modern individualism in check and re-introduce *tazkiya* in response to the worldwide spiritual crisis? Can it complement existing forms of religiosity rather than contradicting them, and start a dialogue so as to remedy their shortcomings? Lastly, might this individualistic, spiritual form of religiosity be able to play a role in the spiritual drought that lies ahead?

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<sup>425</sup> Flanagan, Kieran and Peter Jupp (2007). *A Sociology of Spirituality*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 6.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

## **THE NEW SUFIS: THE SEARCH FOR SPIRITUALITIES AND INNER PEACE**

*“Mohammad Moaz” al-Masalha*

### **Introduction**

When considering the state of spirituality in Jordan, one encounters a world teeming with schools, philosophies, and concepts that appealed to those who, on finding their lives to be lacking in tranquility, set out to regain it. Indeed, with the increasing hustle and bustle of material life, a general sense of stagnation has come to dominate people's lived experiences, and inner peace is increasingly rare.

Although the spread of philosophical and spiritual schools is not institutional, nor are the schools monolithic, they are linked to a number of established global spiritual traditions. In Jordan, the pursuit of inner peace has led individuals and centers to turn to sources spanning from the Far East to the West, some of whom have found inner peace among Buddhists, Hindus, and believers in esoteric energy, i.e., New Age mystics. These different belief systems are not united by a scientific, cultural, or intellectual system; rather, their adherents assembled because of a shared desire to find themselves and the truth of their existence. Ultimately, they tracked down what they needed to aid them in this search.

Ironically, in our research on New Sufism as described by this paper, we did not find anyone among these schools who actually identifies as a Sufi, nor anyone who represents well-defined Sufi thought or demonstrates a direct connection to it. Nevertheless, they welcome Sufism into their intellectual core and understand it to be nearly synonymous with the notion of spirituality.

This field study seeks to shed light on what might be considered a spiritual phenomenon in Jordanian society. Some use the

term “New Sufism” to describe this phenomenon of returning to spirituality. It does not fall under the umbrella of tariqa-based Islamic mysticism, and in fact exists independently of this system. Instead, New Sufism is a condition of spiritual wayfaring (*suluk*). Its substance comes close to New Age mysticism, which was founded by Inayat Khan in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. New Sufism is grounded in an inclusive concept which transcends the boundaries between religions. It addresses people regardless of who they are or where they are from and reveals their connection to the One and Only Creator.<sup>427</sup>

In R.K. Gupta’s book *Sufism Beyond Religion*, we find Sufism assigned a broad meaning that is representative of the paradigm of New Sufism, or non-tariqa-based Sufism: “to be a real human being, free from all bonds and honest with God.”

Our research found that Jordan exhibits several particularities which are closely related to the limited popular presence of tariqa-based Sufi thought. For the sake of comparison, in Egypt – an Arab, Muslim-majority country – the state of New Sufism or spiritual schools is more straightforward. The modern movement of Universal Sufism has a direct influence and has adapted to the nature of Egyptian Sufism, as reflected in the fact that tariqa-based Sufi movements are more widespread and accepted in Egypt.

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<sup>427</sup> Khan, Hazrat Inayat. (1882 – 1927) was an Indian Sufi who founded Universal Sufism, a spiritual movement based on the unity of all people and religions. Propelled by its master, the movement spread from northern India to the West in the form music, which allowed it to achieve harmony between the East and the West. The movement soon transformed to introduce and transmit Sufi thought and practice to the West. Its message about Divine Unity focused on the topics of love, harmony, and beauty. Today, Inayat Khan’s movement has various branches in Germany, England, Australia, Canada, the United States, France, the Netherlands, and Russia. Inayat Khan connected his passion for music with his Sufi path, and he made an eloquent statement on the nature of music: a harmony line synchronized with the universe itself.

See: “Hazrat ‘Inayat Khan, Ma Huwwa al-Din ‘ind al-Sufi” (translated and prepared by Madani Qasri), *Hafriyyat* website, 30/7/2018: <https://2u.pw/mmQAs>

See also: ‘Emad, Hanan. “Inayat Khan al-Fannan al-Hindi al-Ladhi ‘Allama al-Gharb al-Sufiyya ‘ala Angham al-Musiq.” *Noon Post* website, 9/5/2020: <https://www.noonpost.com/content/36903>

On the other hand, in Jordan, Universal Sufism does not have a direct influence. It has only limited connections with tariqa-based Sufism in Jordan and thus did not assume a clear form. Generally speaking, New Sufism took numerous forms. For example, a number of centers or trainers specializing in meditation and yoga, as well as facilities that are essentially social and cultural centers, adopted traditions and practices that are of a predominantly spiritual nature, or practices which nourish a person holistically (mind, body, spirit, and soul). On one hand, these centers' practices are not grounded in New Sufi thought or the modern notion of Sufism that was espoused by the International Sufi Movement founded by Inayat Khan. Yet we find that the inner working of these centers does intersect with modern Sufi thought, especially with the strong presence of quotations and ideas from Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and al-Hallaj (as transmitted by Orientalists). This is in spite of the fact that traditional or tariqa-based Sufism extends, for example, to the followers of the Mevlevi Order in Turkey. In Jordan, the impact and reach of Jalal al-Din Rumi's poetry arises from sources apart from the poems themselves, such as Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* and the works of the American writer Coleman Barks. Barks has translated hundreds of odes by Jalal al-Din Rumi to English and arranged them in a number of collections since the 1970s. In the United States, he is credited with making Rumi "the number one poet in the country."

What is meant by a "new" version of Sufism is the introduction of ideas, sayings, and poetry from imams and leaders of Sufi orders, despite the fact that in their own day, this content was not part of their followers' understanding or perspective. Their tariqas have lasted to the present time in Turkey and Arab Morocco. The new version of Sufism is limited to poems, translations, sayings, or inferences from ideas which leaders of the Sufi orders recorded in print. Orientalists (among others) picked and chose the components of this output which were needed for their era, so as to respond to the condition of life in the West during the late modernist and post-modern age.

It can be said that what we call "New Sufism" in Jordan has yet to crystallize into a Sufi concept or technical term for a distinct Sufi identity. We find that this condition in Jordan is generally conveyed

using the term spirituality (*al-ruhaniyya*) rather than Sufism, such that the various schools and sources of authority around the world have been able to express themselves in a way that gains acceptance among individuals suffering from spiritual emptiness within their societies. Some of these individuals come from a traditional religious background (Islam, Christianity, or Judaism) or even from societies where non-religious thought has begun to appear. These schools are found in both the East (India and China) and the West (spiritual schools influenced by Eastern spirituality, from Islamic mysticism to Sikhism to Buddhism, etc.). We observe that references to Sufism are well received among those who attend sessions of meditation, breathing exercises, esoteric energy, and yoga.

This paper is based upon interviews with numerous founders of spiritual centers of various kinds in attempt to understand their approach and the relationship between their practices and Islamic mysticism.

### **1. The concept of Sufism/spirituality**

In-depth discussions with attendees and coaches at the above-mentioned sessions revealed a range of different views regarding tariqa-based Sufism. Some are in close proximity to tariqa-based Sufi beliefs and accept them within their system of thought and spiritual practice. Others distance themselves from tariqa-based beliefs in favor of modern Sufism; these individuals see spirituality as existing outside the scope of religion and religiosity, as exemplified by the statement that “Being spiritual is not related to your belief in a particular religion.” Also, this latter group is disconnected from traditional Sufi orders and uninformed about them.

To spiritual people, everyone is capable of communicating with God, i.e., the Creator. They believe in the principle of oneness, otherwise known as “the unity of existence” (*wahdat al-wujud*). In fact, the precise meaning and significance of this term are a source of disagreement even among the leaders of tariqas. Some non-Sufi Islamic groups may deem the concept to be blasphemous.

This understanding of Sufism or spirituality is exemplified by Danah El Masri, the founder of Thea Soul-Chology and an energy and meditation coach. She believes that “spirituality can’t be confined to a definition. It is a state in which a person strips himself free of customs and traditions, striving to communicate with God without any barriers preventing access to Him.”

Danah El Masri’s understanding of Sufism fits within the paradigm of Inayat Khan’s New Sufism. She defines it as “a state in which a person devotes his life to searching for God.” As a result, she sees Sufism as being present in all religions, not only Islam. Even Buddhist monks and shamans are Sufis according to her perspective.

Deena Mukhar-Abu Jaber is the founder of the Golden Leaves Center and an instructor of meditation, breathing techniques, and yoga. She defines Sufism and spirituality in the same way: “the balance which is made possible by interior and exterior connection with God, the self, other people, and the surrounding world.” She continues: “Therefore, if we take the example of tolerance and kindness, if I am not kind to myself, then I won’t be able to be that way [i.e., kind] to my Creator and to the world around me.” Deena acquired the bulk of her knowledge in the field of spirituality from Indian schools in which she depends on Sanskrit philosophy texts. She considers herself spiritual but not religious and believes that “A spiritual person can be religious, but a religious person isn’t spiritual.” Nevertheless, she thinks that the true goal of religions is for people to meet and connect with one another. Abu Jaber adds, “If you want to be a true reflection of your Creator, you have to be accepting of people of other faiths.”

In terms of Abu Jaber’s stance on Islamic mysticism in general, she sees Sufis as more understanding of diversity compared to other religions. She explains, “Since Islam is the youngest of the Abrahamic religions, it is more capable of accommodating the rest of the religions. And Sufis are the most accommodating because they are more “global and more in tune with the universe.” They are more merciful and are thus more accepting of the Other.”



## 2. The approaches of tariqa-based Sufism and New Sufism

To introduce an examination of the similarities and differences between New Sufism and tariqa-based Sufism, we will highlight several essential aspects of each school's thought. In addition to the concept of Sufism/spirituality – the meaning of which varies among people according to their spiritual experiences – there are several points which help the researcher to understand the differences between the two sufisms.

**(2.1)** The first point is the concept of God. That is, how does an individual see his relationship with God? This ranges from the concept of the Unity of Existence (i.e., the belief in God Almighty) to the attributes of beauty, majesty, perfection, etc.

Deena Mukhar-Abu Jaber relates that early in life, she built a relationship with God based on fear and awe. The relationship continued until 2013, when she reached the conclusion that the path to knowing God starts with complete surrender to Him. At this point, a new relationship began, and she began to see her relationship with God as “unconditional.” In other words, the key is to be honest with God. She found that as she became more comfortable with herself, she became more in touch with both God and herself in order to fulfill God's purpose and will. She began to see her relationship with God as beautiful; it was imbued with energy and synergy which surrounded her like an aura. As a result, and through synergistic courage, Deena reached a degree of acceptance and became ready for anything, even death.

To Deena, “Sufism consists of all the attributes of God.” She has come to believe that she is, as a person, a reflection of God in all His attributes, from beauty (*jamal*) or majesty (*jalal*). However, on the level of human beings, the attributes of beauty should contain the attributes of majesty, keeping them in check. For example, each person's individual makeup includes jealousy and anger, but these attributes should be contained by mercy.

Danah El Masri spent her childhood and her studies in Saudi Arabia. The country's dominant culture influenced her perspective on religion and the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). Later, she freed herself from the intellectual constraints which Saudi culture had imposed on her, especially with regard to spirituality. However, Saudi culture continued to exert some influence on her religious perspective, particularly in terms of the Sunnah (this point will be addressed in the next section).

Explaining her perspective on God and the principle of the Universality of Existence, Danah said she sees God as the ultimate power; he unites us through his power, so people are manifestations of God in this universe. She believes that God is everything, and each human being is one part of this totality.

Danah El Masri interprets the unity of existence by explaining that her relationship with God is a relationship of unity: "[God] is not separate from me, but within me." Just as God created the universe from nothingness (the Big Bang theory), Danah believes that God created everything from Himself.

Through Danah's path in the world of esoteric energy, meditation, and spirituality, she began holding sessions focused on meditating on the names of God. She incorporated chakras into the sessions as well. In her view, the names of God are pathways by which a person can approach excellence (*kamal*). She strives to guide session attendees on how to balance their chakras using the names of God, an approach which reflects the importance of these names and their manifestations among people. She believes that the divine epithet *al-Rahman* ("The Most Compassionate") means accommodation: "The womb (*al-rahm*) is what carries the fetus and accommodates it from the moment of its creation. This is one of the manifestations of the name of God *al-Rahman*." She believes that the desired name of God can be activated through the conviction that "the names of God are the routes along which a person strives in his life, and travelling along them is important in order to achieve balance." She says that this is the area of instruction in her center, and that her journey is ongoing.

Regarding the perspective on God, there are many points of agreement and some points of difference between tariqa-based Sufis and adherents of New Sufism or spirituality. The greatest common factor may be that love is the foundation for one's relationship with God. Among New Sufis or spiritual people, the love of God may be the biggest preoccupation influencing their thought and reasoning. This is especially true because this love came to them after they searched and began building a new relationship with God. By contrast, the previous relationship with God was built on premises inherited from family or society. Such premises cultivated in their spirits a different perspective on God which had caused their previous relationships with God to be built on fear more than love. Over time, this produced in them a state of anger towards God, until they returned to discover the new conception of this relationship.

**(2.2)** The second point is the view regarding the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and the degree of connection to him. Examining this subject provides some of the clearest distinctions between the two sufisms. It is well known that tariqa-based Sufism places great emphasis on Muhammad, the Holy Messenger (PBUH) in terms of the life of the wayfarer, *murid*, or Sufi. He holds such importance to that some followers of other Islamist groups consider tariqa-based Sufis to be exaggerating or even guilty of idolatry (*shirk*) in some cases.

Among Sufi orders, the connection with Muhammad (PBUH) spans all stages of wayfaring (*suluk*), preceding life and continuing after death. It is linked to the Sufi community's concept of "the Muhammadan truth." Meanwhile, among New Sufis and spiritual people, we find a major difference in their attitude regarding the extent of their spiritual connection to the Prophet Muhammad and the other Messengers.

Danah El Masri's relationship with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was initially based on the inherited ideas in the social environment in which she was raised, Saudi Arabia. Over the course of her spiritual journey, she passed through a number of different stages as her intellectual and spiritual foundation changed. Initially, she considered Islam a backwards religion, but she still loved the Prophet

(PBUH). In time, she began to distance herself from the Sunna due to pent-up anger over both the Sunna and the way it was applied in Saudi Arabia. However, as she continued her wayfaring in the world of spirituality, she began to have love for the Prophet (PBUH) again. This love was not tied to any particular path, such as the wayfaring of tariqa-based Sufis.

Now, Danah sees the Prophet as a symbol, though she is critical of those who venerate him almost to the point of worshipping him.” Danah affirms that “the Prophet’s journey inspires me, especially the revelation [*wahi*] through which all of the attributes of God were manifested. When he was ready, the revelation came down to him. It became a source of inspiration for us, so that we can summon his [the Prophet’s] attributes. Through his acquisition of the divine manifestations, he provides a practical example of the condition of human excellence.” Danah’s perspective on the Prophet makes room for incorporating the Prophet (PBUH) into the meditations that she holds and teaches in her center (i.e., meditations on the names of God). She believes that he was called the Seal of the Prophets because he perfected everything related to earthly and living values, and he is a role model and a paragon.

Deena Mukhar-Abu Jaber’s perspective towards Muhammad (PBUH) and her relationship with him began in an unconventional way. She was raised in a Christian family and attended Christian school. She views Muhammad (PBUH) and all of God’s prophets in a way that is compatible with her perspective on faith, which is rooted in the complementarity of God, the spirit, and the surrounding world (people, souls, things, etc.).

Deena has respect for the prophets, first and foremost because God selected them to carry his message to the people during their time. From Deena’s viewpoint, the prophets were sent by God as delegates to provide a “guidebook” to compel humankind to follow the right path. She believes that all of the prophets were “brilliant people who achieved great contact with God the Creator, and who did a great deal of work on themselves to make contact with God in this way. They had within them a moral strength that was greater than

the rest of humankind.” Deena respects this aspect of the prophets. She is open-minded to learning from them and about them, as they were basically “messengers from God whose souls were made distinct from the rest of humankind so as to be capable of carrying the great message on behalf of God.”

Deena believes that ‘ulama’ like Jalal al-Din Rumi came to humankind later and worked to teach topics which people of today are unable to grasp. However, in spite of the greatness of these teachings, they did not reach the level of the Divine Books.

Returning to the extent of her connection to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Deena relates an experience she had when she was suffering from discomfort and general fatigue. She asked a friend for ayahs or prayers from the Holy Qur’an, hoping they might lessen her symptoms. He provided her with supplications and litanies from a tariqa-based Sufi shaykh and Knower of God (*‘arif billah*). The supplications consisted of various forms of prayer for the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and they had a major impact on her recovery. Deena says that she received the litanies and supplications with an open mind, considering them a gift and a trust from the spiritual world. She says that the individual who gave her this trust was the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and that the supplication functioned like a medicine to heal wounds. She adds that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) aided her through her friend; of all the Messengers, it was the Prophet who stood by her and took care of her during that period.

Deena also addresses her relationship with the rest of the prophets and Christian and Sufi saints. She mentions that Mary (PBUH) and the Prophet Moses (PBUH) have stood by her side during many trying times. So has Jalal al-Din Rumi, whom she holds in high regard when considering her spiritual journey and the place which she has reached today. In characterizing her relationship with the prophets and saints, Deena says that many of them show up when needed and stand with her, almost like a defense attorney. Deena adds that she speaks “from real emotions and real experience.” She thinks that they care for her because she is careful in her life. She is grateful to them, and grateful to God for watching out for the hearts

of his servants and watching the extent to which they put their affairs in His hands. When she encounters any problem, the prophets and the righteous ones are there to save her.

In summary, we find there to be variation in way in which spiritual people or New Sufis relate to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This results from differences in each individual's socialization. People's spiritual behavior provides the opportunity to get to know the Prophet, albeit that the exact source of this familiarity is unique from one person to the next.

### **3. Punishment and reward**

One of the important topics in research regarding the idea of New Sufism or spirituality is that of punishment and reward, which relates to practitioners' knowledge of the names of God and his attributes. Adherents of New Sufism or spiritual people tend to see God in terms of love and beauty, without introducing or emphasizing the notion of punishment in the traditional sense that is present in various religions.

In general, we find that spiritual people react against the traditional religious perspective of punishment and reward, because this traditional view separated them from God and His love. Furthermore, prior to their embarking on spiritual journeys, punishment and reward made fear and anger the basis of their relationship with God. However, this concept is not wholly absent from spiritual people's philosophical understanding of spirituality and existence; in fact, it is particularly evident in the beliefs of teachers and coaches in this field.

Deena Abu Jaber considers punishment and reward as real and necessary, since God judges people after the end of their worldly lives. However, her understanding of punishment and reward comes from her belief that the soul has a life of its own: God chose for a soul to become a person. She is honored that God chose her soul to inhabit her human form. After its human existence, the soul returns to God, and appears before a council chosen by God in order to be assessed

before the Final Judgment. Abu Jaber thinks that this judgment is indeed final, whereas the evaluation is an earlier stage for souls which God has not yet allowed to ascend.

Meanwhile, Danah El Masri builds her thought on the basis of the law of cause and effect (karma). In her view, punishment and reward are the result of our actions, and God does not treat anyone unjustly. Thus, anything that happens to a person is deserved. Likewise, punishment and reward in the hereafter the result of a person's actions. However, she believes that the type of punishment is one delivered in the afterlife.

### Conclusion

A person may be seen engaging in both experiences or versions of Sufism (tariqa-based Sufism and New Sufism). That is, he may at times draw from this condition of the spread of spiritual doctrines and New Age mysticism, while at other times turning to tariqa-based Sufism and the beauty and excellence he knows it to possess. This dual reliance instills his heart with motivation to build a bridge to connect the two paths. This creates a path for spiritual people (or adherents of New Sufism) in order to become familiar with the whole world of tariqa-based Sufism based on their knowledge and examination of this world.

This is what the young man Khalid Walid does as the founder of the Mi'raj Healing, a project which he started after becoming familiar with a number of schools in the fields of *'ilm al-taqa* (the knowledge of esoteric energy), meditation, and spiritualities. Curiosity then led him to research spirituality in Islam, and he came upon *The Forty Rules of Love*. From this point, he moved to tariqa-based Sufism.

He found his heart's desire in the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Sufi order: the love of God and the love of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Walid took it upon himself to define the community of New Sufism and individualist religiosity as a path towards tariqa-based Sufism. He mixed the two forms of Sufism using an agreeable, comprehensi-

ble language that draws on the terminology of New Age mysticism and meditation. He also incorporated spiritual and tariqa-based Sufi messages, extending a bridge to those who want to join the world of tariqa-based Sufism. He made it easy to do so in a manner that was compatible with an individual's intellectual premises.





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CHAPTER FIVE

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Sufism and Politics:  
Power and Opposition



## POLITICAL FEATURES OF SUFI DISCOURSE

*Dr. Ammar Ali Hassan*

### **Introduction: Our Need for Mysticism**

Now more than ever, the world, and our region in particular, has an urgent need for mysticism, with its countless paths and forms spanning all religions. Spiritual thirst has reached an all-time high, while morality has degenerated to new lows. The conscience has atrophied due to over-dependence on demonstrative reasoning based on intellect (*'aql*), transmission (*naql*), and experience (*tajriba*). Human beings are experiencing an unprecedented level of objectification due to the brutality of capitalism, the spread of market culture, and the intensifying struggle for material benefit and gains, power, influence, and political office. Religiosity has degenerated into hollow, material acts and rituals carried out mechanically without devotion, humility, reflection, or consideration. Those who should be fostering morals and virtue are instead enticed by power, leading them to shirk their responsibilities in the areas of creed, proselytization, and education. Far from advocating religion, most of these individuals instead sow discord in religion. Furthermore, all dialogues – including those on topics of religion, education, and culture – have failed, as no one can see beyond the end of their own nose.

Religions have long been dragged into political conflicts. However, this phenomenon has worsened in recent decades, despite many believing that the separation between religion and the state should be noncontroversial for anyone who supports secularism and modernization, or anyone who worries about his or her faith being used to settle earthly quarrels or cheap political power struggles. Numerous studies have corroborated that religion has become a major factor in global conflict, especially since the fall of the Soviet Union; that there are political systems which remain committed to turn-

ing religion into ideology and endowing clergymen with power over society; that in even the brightest of democracies, religious institutions have managed to influence political decisions; and that there are politicians who exploit religious expressions and cues to try to glamorize their repugnant agendas and deceive their audience.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are those who believe they can confine religion within the walls of mosques, churches, and temples. They instead seek to organize worldly life according to the values, ideas, concepts, and meanings produced by pure human wisdom and imposed by the material developments which resulted from humanity's creative interaction with nature throughout history. Those who espouse this viewpoint fail to appreciate religion's invaluable role in building society.

Mysticism exists in the space between these two opposing stances. Like a gentle breeze, it carries away the dust kicked up by the brawl for earthly spoils. Like a ray of light, it shines into the stygian darkness which oppresses both body and soul. But to which mysticism are we referring? Is it that of the dervishes who wander through the streets and byways? Is it that of Sufi tariqas (orders), which tend to conflate religion with folklore and charity with expediency? Or is it the mysticism of the hermit who secludes himself in a lodge (*zawiya*) or immerses himself in a spiritual concert (*sama*), his mind lost in contemplation of the realm of *Malakut* as he recites an endless chant to glorify God?

In response to the afflictions faced by humanity, the call for mysticism is essentially a call for faith – pure, profound faith which quenches spiritual thirst, casts light into the dark recesses of the soul, and imbues people with goodness until it emanates from their every word and action. Rather than being confined to the “shell” of faith, mysticism permeates to the “kernel”; it avoids hollow façades, instead concerning itself with faith's innermost essence. It prefers the company of saints (*walis*) and distances itself from impostors.

This form of mysticism is undergirded by identifiable pillars, which can be derived from the understanding that was left for us by

great Sufis and monks. They attained this understanding through *ahwal* (transitory states of enlightenment endowed by God), *maqamat* (stages or “stations” achieved along the path to illumination), *adhwaq* (direct “tasting” of invisible realities or of God), and *mawajid* (“found” states of ecstatic consciousness). The pillars may be described as follows:

1. God is nearer to us than our own jugular veins. He is a sublime, universal force. We can feel the majesty and beauty of this force if we struggle against our appetites and triumph over our shortcomings. God loves us as His creation, and we must love Him as our Creator. His mercy and forgiveness encompass everyone and everything. We must not violate His will by imposing our religion on His creation, or by allowing ourselves to judge them in this world or determine their destinations in the hereafter (*al-akhirah*).

2. The universe is far greater than what we can imagine, so each of us must practice humility to the fullest extent possible; we {cannot rend the earth asunder, nor reach the mountains in height} (Qur’an 17:37). Consequently, each person must believe that he is in constant need of the protection of God and the cooperation of humankind.

3. The brotherhood of man is the foundation. Humanity must not battle one another or engage in struggles over the “allurements of the life of this world.” Instead, people should be bound by love, solidarity, tolerance, and mercy for one another. It is these noble and profound values which religions strive to ingrain and work continually to protect.

4. Mysticism resonates with a shared, universal aspect of humanity: emotion, which runs the gamut from love and benevolence to hatred and malevolence. In this respect, people have a great deal in common and are bound together inextricably. Love, for instance, does not vary depending on whether a man’s skin is white, brown, yellow, or red. The cultural heritage of humanity affirms that the love between Qays and Layla was no different than that between Romeo and Juliet.

The essence of mysticism is that the individual is drawn love God, which is an energy vaster, more profound, and more sublime than the love between a man and a woman. But the capacity to love God is just as universal as the capacity for amorous love. It is found among Sufi and Christian saints and others who are similarly concerned with attaining eternal truth (*al-haqiqa al-sarmadiyya*). To see these commonalities, one only has to set aside jurisprudential and theological differences regarding details, procedures, and rituals. Though such differences are used to make a distinction between the monotheistic faiths, these religions ultimately share a common origin and draw from the same wellspring.

5. People have a pressing need for many aspects of Sufism. *Zuhd*, or asceticism, is true wealth, for it steels the resolve and makes it possible to rise above the world. It enables a person to resist all those who seek to enslave him with money, status, and power. It is a duty to love God, humanity, and things – not a love of ownership mired in excessive egoism, but the kind of love that fosters altruism and teems with bliss, gratitude, and joy. Intuition is a blessing given by God to his worshippers in accordance with their love for Him. It allows them to transcend the bounds of tangible reality. Endowed with inspiration (*ilham*), they gain a heightened perception and the ability to sense omens and receive prophecies.

Mysticism is also able to make a profound and innovative contribution toward solving the repeated failure of dialogue between religions, or more precisely, the failure of dialogue between the adherents of different religions. Dialogue reaches a gridlock as each party retreats behind his own beliefs in attempt to prove the other wrong. In some cases, each party comes to the dialogue with the sole purpose of persuading the other side to change his beliefs or sowing doubt and uncertainty in his heart and mind regarding these beliefs. Similarly, some take advantage of dialogues as an opportunity to defend one's religion or to rebut "suspicions and falsehoods" about their religion, due to their perception of others as malevolent, lurking enemies.

Here it is important to emphasize the distinction between mysticism (*tasawwuf*) and Sufi fraternalism (*turuqiyya*). While the latter may be committed to the essence of mysticism in some respects, in other ways it deviates. Sufi fraternalism consists of saints but also impostors. Importantly, the ideas on which Sufi tariqas are founded have a political dimension and are emboldened through real-world application. This subject will be the focus of the points ahead.

### **I. Political concepts and values in Sufi thought and language**

Sufi religious thought, in terms of its language and themes, is based upon on four elements: *zuhd* (asceticism), *wilaya* (sainthood), *mahabba* (love), and *ma'rifa* (mystical knowledge). These produce a particular political culture in which *murids* (disciples) of the various tariqas are socialized. In the case of *zuhd*, there is a causal relationship between politics and Sufi thought. *Zuhd* is born out of politics, and in certain situations and circumstances it produces political behavior, some positive and some negative. Likewise, Sufi thought has an effect on sainthood due to the particular form of political practice which sainthood imposes within Sufi organizations, (i.e., tariqas). Meanwhile, *mahabba* and *ma'rifa* have been known to take spiritual, emotional, and symbolic forms. However, they have a political resonance, as there is a political dimension to the public values which they produce.

#### **a. The language of Sufism: strengthening values of cooperation, cohesion, affiliation, and authoritarianism**

Language is considered to be the "vessel of thought" and an expression of identity and autonomy<sup>428</sup> through its close connection to the community which employs it.<sup>429</sup> The language of Sufism has a particular character, as it relies on symbolism. Therefore, its expres-

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<sup>428</sup> Mubarak, Zaki. (1990 AD / 1411 AH) "Al-Lugha wa-l-Din wa-l-Taqalid." *Kitab al-Hilal* (476) Muharram/August, 340.

<sup>429</sup> Al-Tuni, Mustafa Zaki. (1992/1993 AD, 1412/1413 AH). "'Ilal al-Taghir al-Lughawi". *Hawaliyyat Kuliyyat al-Adab* (Annual 13, Paper 84). Kuwait: University of Kuwait, 11.



sions carry meanings which, in many cases, can only be understood through analysis and in-depth interpretation. They often seem far from the general public's understanding and grasp.<sup>430</sup>The Sufi lexicon succeeded in shaping a highly idiosyncratic language that references Sufi ideas, states, and behaviors in a way that differs markedly from other forms of religious language, such as Islamic jurisprudence.

'Abd al-Razzaq al-Kashani (d. 730/1329) compiled these terms in his book *Mu'jam Istilahat al-Sufiyya* (A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms)<sup>431</sup>. Before him, al-Qushayri presented a number of terms in his famous epistle *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, including the following:

- “moment” (*waqt*), station, and “condition” (*hal*)
- “contraction” (*qabd*) and “expansion” (*bast*)
- “awe” (*hayba*) and “intimacy” (*uns*)
- “ecstatic behavior” (*tawajud*), “ecstatic rapture” (*wajd*), and “ecstatic finding” (*wujud*)
- “unification” (*jam*), “separation” (*farq*), and “the unification of the unification” (*jam' al-jam*)
- “annihilation [of the self]” (*fana'*) and “subsistence” (*baqa'*)
- “absence” (*ghayba*) and “presence” (*hudur*)
- “sobriety” (*sahw*) and “intoxication” (*sukr*)
- “tasting” (*dhawq*) and “drinking” (*sharb*)
- “erasure” (*mahw*) and “affirmation” (*ithbat*)
- “concealment” (*satr*) and “manifestation” (*tajalli*)
- “presence” (*muhadara*), “the uplifting of the veil” (*mukashafa*), and “witnessing” (*mushahada*)
- “glimmers” (*lawai'h*), “dawnings” (*tawali'*), and “flashes” (*lawami'*)
- “raids” (*bawadih*) and “attacks” (*hujum*)
- “inconstancy” (*talwin*) and “stability” (*tamkin*)
- “near” (*qarib*) and “far” (*ba'id*)

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<sup>430</sup> Al-Tawil, Tawfiq. (1985 AD / 1405 AH) *Fi Turathina al-'Arabi al-Islami*. 'Alam al-Ma'rifa series (87) Jumada al-Akhir. Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Watani li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Finun wa-l-'Adab, 174-175.

<sup>431</sup> Al-Kashani, 'Abd al-Razzaq. *Mu'jam Istilahat al-Sufiyya*. Edited and introduced by Abdel Aal Shahin.

- “the Divine Law” (*shariʿ*) and “the True Reality” (*haqiqā*)
- “the soul” (*nafs*)
- “passing thought” (*khatir*)
- “certain knowledge” (*ilm al-yaqin*), “the essence of certainty” (*ʿayn al-yaqin*), and “the truth of certainty” (*haqq al-yaqin*)
- “occurrence” (*warid*)
- “witness” (*shahid*)
- “spirit” (*ruh*)
- “the innermost self” (*sirr*)<sup>432</sup>

As seen above, the language of Sufism exhibits characteristics of the language of poetry, which tends to appeal to feelings and emotions rather than to reason or intellect. Its fundamental aim is to suggest truths and feelings rather than explaining matters and bringing them towards the domain of the intellect. Mysterious and intentionally vague, Sufi language is steered by the imagination and abounds with expressions, comparisons (*tashbihat*), metaphors (*majazat*), and unconventional word usages. It avoids analyses and abhors proofs and abhors exhaustive explanation and reasoning.<sup>433</sup> The unique and ambiguous nature of Sufi parlance has political implications because it encourages particular values, some of which are favorable and others, unfavorable. Ultimately, language contributes significantly to the emergence of social and political phenomena in the following way:<sup>434</sup>

1. It promotes values of cooperation and cohesion within groups (i.e., Sufi tariqas) and is a means of supplication to the Creator, the Most Sublime and Powerful.<sup>435</sup> Each tariqa has a particular language which distinguishes it from the rest and gives its members a

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<sup>432</sup> Al-Qushayri, Abu al-Qasim Ibn Hawazin. (1966 AD / 1385 AH). *Al-Risala al-Qushayriyya* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Vol. 1, Abdel-Halim Mahmoud and Mahmoud bin al-Sharif, authentication and Introduction). Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha. 188-251.

<sup>433</sup> Wafi, Ali Abd al-Wahid. (1980). *Nashat al-Lughā ʿind al-Insan wa-l-Tifl*. Cairo: Dar Nahdat Masr li-l-Tabaʿa wa-l-Nashr. 135-136.

<sup>434</sup> Bani, Malik Bin. (1979 AD / 1399 AH). *Shurut al-Nahda*. (Abd al-Sabur Shahin, Trans.). Tripoli: Dar al-Fikr. 22.

<sup>435</sup> Kharma, Nayef. (1978 AD / 1398 AH). *Adwaʿ ʿala al-Dirasat al-Lughawiyya al-Muʿasara*. Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Watani li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Funun wa-l-Adab. ʿAlam al-Maʿrifa series #9, Ramadan / September. 211-212.

sense of shared destiny and common purpose. The effect is to uphold the value of group affiliation – as is reflected by group cohesion and solidarity – in addition to enforcing the division of duties among members. In this context, speech is less important for its literal meaning than for the way in which it employs certain standardized and widely recognized formulas. These formulas may involve speech or utterances, or they may involve nonverbal semiotic activity. An example of the latter is the practice of kissing in the Hamidi Shadhili tariqa, where it is called *musafaha*, or “shaking hands.”<sup>436</sup> Despite being an unspoken language, such a ritual serves to strengthen social relations in the tariqa, and thus exemplifies what the German scholar Jürgen Habermas termed “institutional speech acts.”<sup>437</sup>

There is another characteristic of Sufi language which supports cohesion and unity within the tariqa: the spoken word. Sufis rely upon it more than the written word, and it is one of the cultural developments found in groups with tight social bonds. When a speaker addresses an audience, the audience members generally become united, either amongst themselves or with the speaker. By contrast, if the speaker were to direct the audience’s attention to a written document, such unity would disappear as each individual entered into the private world of reading. Unity would not be restored until speech resumed.<sup>438</sup> The language of Sufism is only understood by those within tariqas, yet these organizations are open to the general public, including those who are illiterate. Therefore, *adhkar* (invocations or remembrances of God) and *awrad* (litanies) are memorized and repeated orally, in some cases without a full grasp of their substance, meaning, and secrets. This oral emphasis is one of the foundations for cohesion within Sufi tariqas.

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<sup>436</sup> Through the author’s participation in the Hamidiyya Shadhiliyya tariqa, it was observed that when *murids* meet one another, they shake hands by placing both hands at face level. Each party then kisses the hands of the other, which signals recognition and intimacy among the *murids* of this tariqa.

<sup>437</sup> Fahkuri, Adel. (1990). *Tayarat fi al-Simiya’* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a. 101-102.

<sup>438</sup> Ong, Walter J. (1994). *Al-Shafahiyya wa-l-Kitaba* (Hasan al-Bina Ezzedin, Trans., Mohammad Asfour, Rev.). Kuwait: al-Majlis al-Watani li-l-Thaqafa wa-l-Funun wa-l-Adab. ‘Alam al-Ma’rifa series, Issue 182, February. 152.

2. This mysterious, unified language also supports authoritarianism. Its secrets are hoarded by the select few within the *tariqa* who know how to interpret and explain them, while the rest of the *murids* only recite the language, ignorant of its meaning.<sup>439</sup> The disciples stand in awe of those who are able to understand, and are thus rendered submissive and obedient as their limited knowledge restricts their freedom to pose inquiries and engage in discussions.<sup>440</sup>

On the other hand, the Sufi language has grown increasingly unique and ambiguous as Sufis and Islamic scholars grow more distant from those who believe in science and intellect. The struggle has united both parties against the Sufis. That is, in the view of Islamic scholars, some aspects of Sufi language transgress *Shari'a* under the pretext of presenting the truth about it. As for the 'ulama', they see it as a language of intuition which cannot be measured or subjected to scientific reasoning.

### **b. Sufi *ma'rifa*: perpetuating values of subordination and control**

The Sufi movement represents a unique model in Islamic knowledge, one which is not persuaded by demonstrative argument but instead believes in intuition.<sup>441</sup> By contrast, philosophers use rational methodologies in order to reach the truth. Theologians rely on intellect to establish religious creed or refute their opponents' campaigns or their enemies' arguments. The 'ulama' rely on observation and experimentation to find out the nature of things. Sufis, meanwhile, use unveiling (*kashf*) or direct experience as a way to understand hidden metaphysical truths. Unveiling resembles an ephemeral flash and follows physical exertion and psychological suffering.<sup>442</sup>

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<sup>439</sup> Regarding language and consciousness, see: Chauchard, Paul. *Al-Lughah al-Fikriyya* (Salah Abu al-Walid, Trans.). *Al-Manshurat al-'Arabiyya* series, Issue 12.71.

<sup>440</sup> Regarding the authoritarianism of language, see: Barthes, Ronald. (1975). *The Pleasure of Text* (Richard Miller, Trans.). New York: Mill and Wang. 40.

<sup>441</sup> Al-'Ajam, Rafiq. (1993). *Athr al-Khususiyya al-'Arabiyya fi al-Mujtam'at al-Islamiyya* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Fikr al-Lubnani. 154.

See also: Qasim, Mohammad. (1993). *Dirasat fi al-Filsafa al-Islamiyya* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif. 154.

<sup>442</sup> Al-Tawil, Tawfiq. *Ibid.*, 174.

Sufi *ma'rifa* is direct, with no need for intermediaries such as auxiliaries (*muqaddamat*), propositions (*qadaya*), or proofs (*barahin*). It is located above the level of the mind, and only those who follow the path of Sufism can possess it.<sup>443</sup> Abu Hamid al-Ghazali termed this knowledge *'ilm al-wiratha*, or “the science of inheritance,” and saw it exemplified in religious jurisprudence. He stated: “The Sufis are distinct from the rest of the ‘ulama’ by an additional science, the science of inheritance [...] When a person practices *zuhd* in this world, the valley of his heart widens, and through it flow the waters of the religious sciences. As the waters merge, they become vessels for these sciences”.<sup>444</sup> This knowledge cannot be attained through learning but only through direction experience and transitory states of enlightenment. It is agnostic light of understanding (*nur 'irfani*) which God emits by manifesting in the hearts of saints. Through this knowledge, they are able to distinguish between truth and falsehood without reliance upon a book or any other medium.<sup>445</sup> Al-Ghazali differentiated knowledge based on the mind and the senses from intuitive knowledge, concluding that intuitive knowledge or Sufi unveiling (*kashf*) produces insights which the senses and the mind can never grasp, especially in regard to “hidden things” (*umur ghaybiyya*).<sup>446</sup>

Generally speaking, Sufi *ma'rifa* is knowledge of a condensed form. It involves experiences, “experiments” (*tajarib*), and ways of classifying them. It consists of an accumulation of information, techniques, theories, ideologies, and moral principles, as well as mystical, hidden knowledge (*'ilm batini kashfi*) which is not subject to rational

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<sup>443</sup> Badawi, Abd al-Rahman. (1975). *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf al-Islami min al-Bidaya hata Nihayat al-Qarn al-Thani al-Hijri* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Kuwait: Wikalat al-Matbu'at, 21-22.

<sup>444</sup> Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Vol. 5). Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 45-46.

See also: Al-Suhrawardi, Shahab al-Din. *'Awarif al-Ma'arif* (Vol. 1, edited by Abd al Halim Mahmoud and Mahmoud al-Sharif). Cairo: Dal al-Kutub al-Haditha, 148.

<sup>445</sup> Al-Ghazali, Abu Hamid. *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal* (edited by Jamil Saliba and Kamal Ayad). Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 132.

<sup>446</sup> Al-Nashar, Mustafa. (1989). “Al-Ghazali wa-Nazariyyat al-Ma'rifa.” *Majallat 'Alam al-Fikr* 19(4), Kuwait: Wizarat al-'Ilam al-Kuwaitiyya, 169-170.

argumentation.<sup>447</sup> To neglect intuition is seen as deeply flawed. As al-Qushayri wrote, “if someone could absorb all the sciences and keep the company of many different people, he would still be unable to attain the rank of the real men unless he engaged in [ascetic] exercises under the supervision of a [Sufi] master, a religious leader or a sincere preacher. If someone has not learned his manners from a teacher who has shown him the faults of his works and the flippancy of his soul, you must not follow his example in rectifying [your own] works.”<sup>448</sup> The great mystic Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 261/874), known as King among the Knowers of God (Sultan al-‘Arifin), responded to some ‘ulama’ who challenged his discourse on the grounds that it was beyond knowledge. “Have you learned the entirety of knowledge?” al-Bastami asked one critic. “No,” he said. Al-Bastami replied, “This is from the half of knowledge which has yet to reach you.”<sup>449</sup> Sufi *ma‘rifa* translates into political socialization in the following manner:

1. It supports authoritarian values, due to the existence of a pattern of knowledge which fosters a closed mind. This mindset purports to possess truth as it is in direct contact with the Divine Essence. It is based on God-given knowledge which leaves no room for demonstrative reasoning, resulting in a “resigned mind” which is immune to argumentation.<sup>450</sup> No one can convince such a mind to face practical reality using concrete and tangible tools. This arrogance leads to obsessive insularity and self-isolation. It also produces a mocking attitude towards the thoughts of ordinary people for whom politics occupies a major part of their attention and their thoughts – for instance, their demands of the authorities and, consequently, their stance for or against the authorities.

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<sup>447</sup> Regarding the meaning of *ma‘rifa*, see: Al-Khawli, Osama. (1989). “Fi Manhaj al-Bahth al-‘Ilmi: Wahda Am Tanawwa’?”. *‘Alam al-Fikr* 20(1), April/May/June, 3.

<sup>448</sup> Al-Qushayri. *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>449</sup> Mahmoud, Abdel-Halim. (1985). *Sultan al-‘Arifin: Abu al-Yazid al-Bastami*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 44.

<sup>450</sup> Regarding the “resigned mind,” see: Al-Jabri, Mohammed Abed. (1989). “Takwin al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi.” *Naqd al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi* series (1). Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-‘Arabiyya, 14.

2. The value of submission and surrender to power is enshrined because it is difficult to engage in collective action against it. As gnosis spreads and everything becomes intuition-based, people are stripped of power, as power is after all both produced and defended by the intellect. At the same time, the submission of Sufis to the political authorities parallels their submission to the Divine Essence. According to their view (or their delusion), power is the watchful eye of God.<sup>451</sup>

3. Sufi *ma'rifa* leads to the sanctification of persons.<sup>452</sup> From the moment a person joins the ranks of Sufism until he reaches a position of prominence, he is enveloped in an aura of cosmic self-importance. Since this intuition-based knowledge cannot be verified or refuted, it becomes particularly entrenched. Likewise, it is hard to refute such a person's claims or assertions about sainthood and the resulting supernatural deeds (*karamat*) which dazzle the general public.

Therefore, some Sufis see themselves as elites who are superior to the rest of humanity. As Dr. Abdel-Halim Mahmoud says, "Sufism is aristocratic. The nature of things prevents it from being any other way. It is a system of 'chosen ones,' a group whom God has granted heightened senses, acute intellect, a spiritual nature (*fitra ruhaniyya*), near-angelic goodness, and a character that is practically composed of light."<sup>453</sup> The result of this haughtiness is the sanctification of persons, who then gain a reputation among the people as being saints of God or shaykhs of an exalted status.

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<sup>451</sup> Hanafi, Hassan. (1981). *Fi Fikrina al-Mu'asar. Qadaya Mu'asara* series (No. 1, 1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 133-134.

Regarding the relationship between cultural makeup and type of government, see: Duverger, Maurice. (1991 AD / 1411 AH). *'Ilm al-Ijtima' al-Siyasa: Mabadi' 'Ilm al-Siyasa* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Salim Haddad, trans.). Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-Jami'iyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi', 93-94.

<sup>452</sup> Hofmann, Murad. (1993). *Al-Islam ka-Badil* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Gharib Mohammed Gharib, trans.). Mu'assasat Bafaria al-Almaniyya, 87.

<sup>453</sup> Mahmoud, Abdel-Halim. (1980). *Qadiyyat al-Tasawwuf: al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 257.

### c. *Zuhd*: disengagement versus political engagement

Asceticism can be considered the forefather of mysticism. It is impossible to find an example of mysticism that was not preceded by an ascetic movement, because it is the essential knowledge needed to establish and maintain mysticism.<sup>454</sup> Asceticism can be summed up as the absence of material desire: neither preoccupation with material wealth nor demand for it.<sup>455</sup> *Zuhd* spread as a result of politics; conflicts broke out between Islamic sects and governors, and social inequality arose after the fall of the Rashidun caliphate, only to further intensify during the Abbasid era. These factors drove some Muslims toward Sufism, self-isolation, and *zuhd*.<sup>456</sup>

*Zuhd* engenders dissident political values; some are favorable and others are unfavorable. It includes abstinence from politics on the grounds that politics is a worldly practice. Such a stance is exemplified by Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha‘rani, one of the great Sufis who abstained from politics, who stated: “God has blessed me with protection from being a judge, a ruler, or a witness to rulers’ concealment of most matters from the people.”<sup>457</sup> Alongside politics, adjudication and arbitration between people had become among the most dangerous occupations.

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<sup>454</sup> Oun, Faisal Bedair. (1983). *Al-Tasawwuf al-Islami: al-Tariq wa-l-Rijal*. Cairo: Maktabat Sa‘id Ra‘fat. Ain Shams University, 109.

<sup>455</sup> Al-Jalaynad, Muhammad al-Sayyid. (1990 AD / 1410 AH). *Min Qadaya al-Tasawwufi Daw’ al-Kitab wa-l-Sana*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Zahra’, 24.

<sup>456</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-38.

Regarding the imbalance in wealth distribution during the Umayyad Era, which lasted until the rule of Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, see: Sa‘d, Ibn. *Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra* (Part 5). Cairo: Matba‘at Dar al-Tahrir, 275.

Regarding the social conditions that prevailed in the Abbasid Era, see: Al-Jahiz. *Al-Bukhala’* (6<sup>th</sup> ed., edited by Taha al-Hajiri). Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif. This literary work ably depicts the way in which obscene wealth and vanity led to miserliness and worsening isolation.

See also: Hanafi, Hassan. (1981). *Al-Turath wa-l-Tajdid* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Tanwir, 79.

<sup>457</sup> Al-Sha‘rani, Abd al-Wahhab. *Lata‘if al-Munan wa-l-Akhlaq*, 433. Full information for this title not available. The researcher relied on a copy which is available in al-Sayeda Zainab library in Cairo.



In another scenario, al-Sha'rani justified his passivity towards rulers: "With the Almighty's blessing, I will not rise against a ruler even if he should lay claim to my home or covet my *zawiya* or my property. I will surrender it to him, for this world is too trivial to me that I would rise, for its sake, against a ruler. Praise God, I would be ashamed to refute a Muslim over what he claims as his own, for all places are identical to me. If someone challenges you for your religion, fight back. If someone challenges you for your worldly possessions, fling them at his throat."<sup>458</sup> In the same vein, Sari al-Saqati, one of the earliest Sufi masters, said, "The Almighty took away the world from His saints, withheld it from His elect, and removed it from the hearts of those whom He loves, for He did not want it for them."<sup>459</sup> Al-Qushayri's *al-Risala* offered some definitions of *zuhd* which help one to choose withdrawal from the world and its affairs. For example, he wrote, "*Zuhd* is the heart's forgetfulness of causes and the hands' shaking themselves free of possessions." In another passage, he referred to "the spirit's unstrained aversion to the world." Austerity reaches its peak in his statement that "If hunger were sold in the market, it would be the sole acceptable purchase for those seeking the hereafter."<sup>460</sup>

Poverty is the path of the ascetic. It is a prerequisite in order for the traveler (*al-salik*) to continue his journey to its destination. If, on the other hand, a person becomes preoccupied with material concerns such as marriage, housing, clothing, or the hoarding of money,

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<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>459</sup> Al-Qushayri. Ibid., 293.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 232.

Regarding different interpretations of *zuhd* in Sufism, see: Nicholson, Reynold Alleyne. (1969). *Al-Tasawwuf al-Islami wa-Tarikhi* (Abo al-Alaa Afifi, Trans.). Cairo: Matba'at Lajnat al-Ta'lif wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 43-47.

See also: Al-Iskandari, Ibn Ata Allah. (1969). *Bahjat al-Nufus* (compiled by Ali Hassan al-'Arid). *Dirasat fi al-Islam* series. Majlis al-'Ala li-l-Shu'un al-Islamiyya, 113.

See also: Al-Kharraz, Abu Sa'id. *Al-Tariq ila Allah* (edited Abdel-Halim Mahmoud). Cairo: Maktabat al-'Uruba, 49.

See also: Al-Muhasibi, Harith. (1969). *Al-Masa'il fi I'mal al-Qulub wa-l-Jawarih wa-l-Makasib wa-l-'Aql* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., edited and annotated by 'Abd al-Qadir Ahmad 'Ata). Cairo: 'Alam al-Kutub, 40-46.

they control his mind and obstruct his spirit from real and lasting goodness, i.e., focusing on the hereafter.<sup>461</sup> However, some Sufis consider *zuhd* to mean nothing more than constant detachment from the world, and not having the world in mind. Many have, in fact, been in possession of extraordinary fortunes, conducting themselves as God's trustees of this material wealth, praying for God to enrich them, and praying that He enable them to enrich His saints.<sup>462</sup>

On the other hand, *zuhd* can foster positive political values in terms of engagement, participation, and resisting tyranny and corruption. Abstention from material things such as wealth and political office means not being subject to the authorities, who distribute resources and political appointments and thus have the means to constrict the livelihood of their opponents (this is especially the case in the developing world). Ascetics are uniquely positioned to resist and rebel against despotism because they have no need for the things which a ruler leverages over the people. As Shaykh al-Sha'rani wrote, "The Almighty has given me contentment, so if I find only a stale crumb, I will be satisfied with it. He who is like this has no need for the sultan's money."<sup>463</sup>

The French researcher François Burgat sees *zuhd* as generally precluding any act of influence or constructiveness, since the current form of *zuhd* instills, as a key part of its activist agenda, the notion that the world is nothing but a source of trial. As a result, devout Muslims cannot be at peace with life in their community; they are consumed by dread of sinning, and haram things seem to pursue them everywhere they go. The only activities that can put them at ease are rituals such as prayer, *dhikr*, and seclusion; other than these exceptions, the world is an affliction (or at least road headed towards affliction). This pedagogical premise does not foster innovation or

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<sup>461</sup> 'Awn, Faysal Budayr. Ibid., 112.

<sup>462</sup> Mahmoud, Abdel-Halim. (1985). *Taj al-Sufiyya Abu Bakr al-Shibli: Hayatuhu wa-'Ara'uhu*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 70-71.

<sup>463</sup> Al-Sha'rani. Ibid., 169.

excellence.<sup>464</sup> Abstention from wealth and political office has usually led to withdrawal rather than engagement or participation. Such was the case among Egyptian Sufis; political resistance was individual and fragmented, with no continuing action of a collective or organized nature. The authorities were able to contain ascetics by funding them and meddling in their organizations, starting with the *khanqat* (Sufi lodges) and leading to the present form, i.e., Sufi tariqas.

However, consideration of *zuhd* as an abstract idea – without regard for the way in which Sufis in Egypt applied it in practice – supports the conclusion that *zuhd* possesses a “bipolar” nature.<sup>465</sup> It can either lead to disengagement or to the opposite, i.e., dissident political values.

#### **d. Wilaya: supporting stability and promoting the values of obedience and submission**

Among Sufis, *wilaya* carries an idiomatic meaning which differs from the general usage. It involves a symbolic form which bears resemblance to the doctrine of imamate in Shi'ism. The Sufi *wali* and the Shi'i imam are both infallible in the eyes of their supporters, and both are entitled to inner knowledge (*'ilm al-batin*), which comes to them as divine inspiration. Furthermore, they are entitled to guardianship (*wisaya*) over their followers, so power remains within their families, passing by succession from one generation to the next.<sup>466</sup>

In the view of Sufis, the world exists in perpetuity thanks to the intervention of a select class of men of the unseen (*rijal al-ghayb*) known as “the concealed saints” (*al-awliya' al-masturin*). They are few in number, but anytime one of them is taken, another replaces him. The *walis* consist of 300 *nuqaba'* (“leaders”), 40 *abdal* (“substi-

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<sup>464</sup> Burgat, François. (1992). *Al-Islam al-Siyasi: Sawt al-Junub* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., Lorraine Fawzi Dhikri). Cairo, Al-'Alam al-Thalith, 33.

<sup>465</sup> This expression was used by Ali Zay'ur in his description of Sufism. See: Zay'ur, Ali. (1979). *Al-Tahlil al-Nifsi li-l-Dhat al-'Arabiyya: al-'Aqliyya al-Sufiyya wa-Nifسانيyyat al-Tasawwuf* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, 5-6.

<sup>466</sup> For more details on this topic, see: Shaybi, Kamil Mustafa. (1969). *Al-Sila bayn al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Tashi'*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif.

tutes”), seven *umana’* (“trustworthy ones”), four *‘umud* (“pillars”) and finally the *qutb* (“pole”), who is also known as *al-ghawth* (“the helper”).<sup>467</sup> *Walis* are endowed with omnipotence, which is variously used for saving the world or for smaller situations; Sufis refer to these supernatural deeds as *karamat*, and they depend in large part on the principle of paradox (*mufaraqa*), which is rooted in imagination and legend.<sup>468</sup>

In his book *Jami’ Karamat al-Awliya’*, al-Nabhani (1265-1350 / 1849-1932) compiled the *karamat* of more than 1,500 shaykhs. Their supernatural deeds include resurrecting the dead, bestowing death upon the living, healing the sick, time travel (*tayy al-zaman*), teleportation (*tayy al-makan*), the ability to talk to animals and inanimate objects, and insight into the treasures and relics of the earth.<sup>469</sup> To refute or disprove the prevalent Sufi belief in *karamat* is outside the scope of this paper. Rather, what matters is how the concept is reflected in Sufis’ political understanding and behavior.

1. One of the most significant features of the belief in legends is that it brings about close-mindedness and authoritarian values. These values categorically exclude new elements from internal and external environments alike, so as to prevent them from compromising internal cohesion. When necessary, care is taken to absorb changes in such a way as to mitigate the risk of modernization or revolution. This is done by injecting the new elements with traditional meanings and connotations rooted in endogenous images, perceptions, and justifications.<sup>470</sup> Consequently, this imagination-based system develops an extraordinary degree of durability and control over

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<sup>467</sup> Da’irat al-Ma’arif al-Islamiyya. *Ibid.*, 334.

See also: Al-Shawkani. *Qatr al-Wali ‘ala Hadith al-Wali* (edited by Ibrahim Hilal). Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 70-85.

<sup>468</sup> Ziedan, Youssef. (1994). “Karamat al-Sufiyya: Nuss Adabi Madad li-l-Tasawwuf.” *Fusul* (Vol. 3, Fall). Al-Hay’a al-Masriyya al-‘Ama li-l-Kitab, 227.

<sup>469</sup> Al-Nabhani, Yusuf bin Ismail. (1984 AD / 1404 AH). *Jami’ Karamat al-Awliya’* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., revised and edited by Ibrahim ‘Atwa ‘Awad). Cairo: Matba’at al-Halabi.

<sup>470</sup> Abd al-Fattah, Nabil. (1993). *‘Aql al-Azma: Ta’ammulat Naqadiyya fi Thaqafat al-‘Unf wa-l-Ghara’iz wa-l-Khiyal al-Mastur* (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Cairo: Dar al-Sashat li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzi’, 125-126.

its adherents.<sup>471</sup> This may help explain how Sufi organizations persisted in Egyptian society despite being exposed to modernization.

2. Reinforced by *wilaya* and faith (*iman*), the concept of *karamat* ultimately promotes submission on the basis of the “unilateral reverence” (*ihthiram uhadi*)<sup>472</sup> which younger *murids* feel towards their guardians, the *walis*. As a result, the value of obedience takes precedence over justice. Myth plays a significant role in fostering submission, as it compensates for the fact that individuals’ expectations cannot in reality be fulfilled in reality. That is, the idea of *karamat* of the saints came about as the embodiment of a collective dream in which ailments and diseases were healed, food was plentiful, and biological needs were finally satisfied. Indeed, when the Muslim world was being ravaged by epidemics and deteriorating economic conditions, the notion of *karamat* gained in popularity. It aimed to compensate for the grueling circumstances and boost morale in the face of food and clothing shortages.<sup>473</sup> Yet it cannot be overstated how much the belief in myths hindered development by undermining sound, scientific thinking,<sup>474</sup> a prerequisite for progress.

### e. *Mahabba* : Promoting tolerance

For Sufis, *mahabba* begins with the love of the Almighty, which necessitates doing what Islamic law commands and avoiding what it forbids (*fi’l al-ma’mur wa-tark al-mahzur*).<sup>475</sup> This extends to Sufis’

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<sup>471</sup> For more on this topic, see: Al-Jabri, Mohammed Abed. (1990). *Al-‘Aql al-Siyasi al-‘Arabi: Muhaddidatuhu wa-Tajalliyatuhu*

<sup>472</sup> For more on this concept, see: Piaget, Jean. (1977). *The Essential Piaget* (Howard F. Guber and J. Jacques Vonèche, Editors). New York: Basic Book, 156-157.

<sup>473</sup> Ziedan, Youssef. *Ibid.*, 227.

Regarding Sufi *karamat*, see also: Al-Munawi. *Al-Kawakib al-Duriyya fi Manaqib al-Sada al-Sufiyya*. Complete information not available. A copy of the text is available in the library of the Sayeda Zainnab Mosque in Cairo.

See also: Al-Shatanufi, Nur al-Din bin Jarir al-Lakhmi. *Bahjat al-Asrar wa-Ma’din al-Anwar fi Ba’d Manaqib ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani*. Cairo: Al-Babili al-Halabi. Date not given.

<sup>474</sup> Al-‘Isawi, ‘Abd al-Rahman. (1984). *Sikulujiyyat al-Khurafa wa-l-Tafkir al-‘Ilmi*. Beirut: Dar al-Nahda al‘Arabiyya, 38-40.

<sup>475</sup> Al-Jalaynad. *Ibid.*, 66.

love for one another, a principle by which they abide with the utmost care. Next, their love encompasses all creatures, as they are the design of the Almighty. *Mahabba* promotes tolerance towards one's fellow *murids*, as well as externally. *Murids* refer to one another as *habib* (beloved), faqir, or brother. In fact, they strive for one another's affection even more than they tend to the feelings of their shaykh. This is because the sheik is believed to be more understanding of the *murids* and their circumstances and therefore less prone to offense. Therefore, some *murids* of the Hamidi Shadhili tariqa frequently invoke the saying, "A shaykh's broken heart may be mended, but the hearts of the beloved cannot."<sup>476</sup> The Sufi value of tolerance may have helped tariqas to take root and spread in Egyptian society.

## II. Political dimensions of Sufi organizations

In the first few centuries after its emergence, Sufism remained merely a private spiritual experience, lacking not only an organization but even connections between individual adherents. However, this situation soon changed as followers gained interest in communicating with one another to review their shared spiritual experiences and benefit mutually. Young people began to form religious gatherings called *halaqat* (circles) centered around Sufi masters from whom they would solicit knowledge and guidance. These were the earliest nuclei for Sufi groups. As a result of genealogical variations between shaykhs, these communities were differentiated, and each shaykh came to have an assemblage of adherents and *murids* who followed his teachings and affiliated with him.

Since the emergence of Sufis, they worked to organize their meetings in the shaykhs' houses or in mosques. However, by the fourth century AH, they had acquired buildings designated specifically for the residence of people from the Sufi community. Strangers and wayfarers would stop there and find food and accommodation. These buildings were known as *zawiyas*, *takiyye*, *ribats*, or *khanqahs*. Gen-

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<sup>476</sup> Interview with 'Abd al-Hamid Hanina, servant to Sheikh Ibrahim Salama al-Radi of the Hamidi Shadhili tariqa, and essentially a historian of the tariqa. Regarding Sufi *mahabba*, see also: 'Awn, Faysal Budayr. *Ibid.*, 125-129. Al-Najjar, Amir. (1984). *Al-Tasawwuf al-Nifsi*. Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif. 318-322.

erally, they were part of a ruler or wealthy person's waqfs, which consisted of interest-bearing land attached to the Sufi lodges. Revenues from the land went to the Sufis.<sup>477</sup>

### **a. Sufi spiritual lineage: the morality of politics and legitimization**

The Sufis put forth a hierarchical structure for leadership for the world consisting of delegates of the Almighty. Examples from within this structure are the *abdal* ("substitutes"), the *awtad*, the *nujaba'* (nobles, s. *najib*), and the *nuqaba'* ("watchmen").<sup>478</sup>

These degrees are strictly ordered. The only way for a Sufi to rise from one rank to the next is through a number of forms of relentless striving (*mujahada*). In order for a *murid* to qualify for advancement within the Sufi spiritual ladder, he must possess particular characteristics such as loyalty, service of the brotherhood, cooperation, generosity towards one's parents, maintaining kinship ties (*silat al-rahm*), hospitality towards guests and neighbors, doing good deeds, and avoiding evil so as to please the Almighty. If a Sufi meets these requirements, he is promoted to the rank variously known as *naqib* or *salik* (traveler). He must then respect the shaykhs and the Sufi 'ulama', cooperate with and value his peers, and consider himself to be lower in rank than them. He must always feel humbled by God and by his brethren, and he must be obedient and avoid envy. If a Sufi is able to assimilate all of these qualities in his character, he is promoted to the rank of *najib* or *wasil* and must undertake several duties. The first is to avoid exposure to people with different viewpoints which could lead to verbal or physical conflict. He must preserve the unity of the Sufi spiritual sessions (*majalis*), guard their secrets, and avoid spying on others or interfering in their affairs. He is expected to set a task for himself in the sessions of knowledge (*majalis al-'ilm*)

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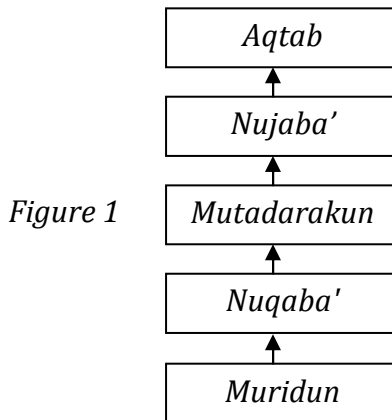
<sup>477</sup> Amin, Hussein Ahmad. (1993). *Al-Ijtihad fi al-Islam ... Haqq Huwwa Am Wajib?* Kutub al-Muwajaha series. Cairo: Al-Hay'a al-Masriyya al-'Ama li-l-Kitab, 150.

<sup>478</sup> Al-Tawil, Al-Sayyid Rizq. (1992). "Al-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi Masr." *Al-Hilal* (May issue), 13.

and taking into consideration people's mental, scientific, and spiritual capacities when dealing with them.<sup>479</sup>

Some put forth a different system: it resembles the spiritual ranking described above, but it is divided into two parts. The first part pertains to the level of striving for acceptance within the Sufi path. This starts with the *murid*, i.e., someone who is seeking to be affiliated with the Sufis. If the *murid* completes his training, he becomes a *salik*, next a *majdhub* ("one who is attracted"), in reference to the Sufi path attracting him and holding sway over his every organ. The next stage is the *mutadarak* ("one who is blessed"), which refers to those who have divorced themselves from the world's adornments and temptations, instead finding contentment in deprivation.

The second half of the system involves those who have been admitted into the tariqa. Someone who is starting the journey is called *mubtadi'* (student). He then becomes a *mutadarrij* (practitioner), which requires him to practice austerity as a spiritual exercise (*riyada*). Finally, the highest authority in the Sufi system is the *qutb*.<sup>480</sup> The Sufi spiritual path can be depicted as seen below in Figure 1.



<sup>479</sup> Qasim, Abd al-Hakim al-Ghani. *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>480</sup> Farhat, Youssef. (1986). *Al-Filsafa al-Islamiyya wa-I'lamuha* (1<sup>st</sup> edition). Geneva: Tradexim, 47.



The Sufi rankings are not simply a matter of spiritual status, but they also coincide with the process of “ascent” (*taraqqi*), which occurs through two varieties of spiritual exercise and *mujahada* (self-mortification) called *maqamat* and *ahwal*. *Maqamat* are achieved through *mujahada*, while the *ahwal* are endowed by the Almighty. Since *maqamat* linger and can be prolonged through spiritual exercise, they are considered a “faculty” (*malaka*). *Ahwal*, by contrast, cannot be sustained or mastered.<sup>481</sup> Sufis move between states of *hal* and *maqam* as they progress deeper into Sufism, immersing themselves and at times regressing when their will falters or their passion cools. The *maqamat* include repentance (*tawba*), patience (*sabr*), contentment (*rida*), *zuhd*, poverty (*faqr*), and abstinence (*waraʿ*). The *ahwal* include meditation (*muraqaba*), closeness (*qurb*), *mahabba*, passion (*shawq*), and intimacy (*uns*).<sup>482</sup>

The conditions mentioned above are crucial for Sufis to be able to move up the ranges within the Sufi *salk*. They support values such as obedience, cooperation, cohesion within the *tariqa*. They cultivate tolerance internally as well as towards individuals outside of the *tariqa*.

As promoted by Sufis, the Sufi spiritual ranking is connected with a holy *silsila* (spiritual lineage). Thus, there is a relationship between the prophets and some saints. The format followed in the *Maqams* (i.e., shrines) of the Prophet Ibrahim and the Prophet David (peace be upon them) in Palestine is the same format followed in the veneration and honoring of some of the saints. There are saints who derive their status from a lineal relationship with certain prophets and their companions and friends. Likewise, there are individuals who enjoy a high degree of reverence and honor in the hearts of the people, and who are ranked in between prophets and saints, such as al-Khidr (peace be upon him).<sup>483</sup> Followers of modern Sufi *tariqas*-

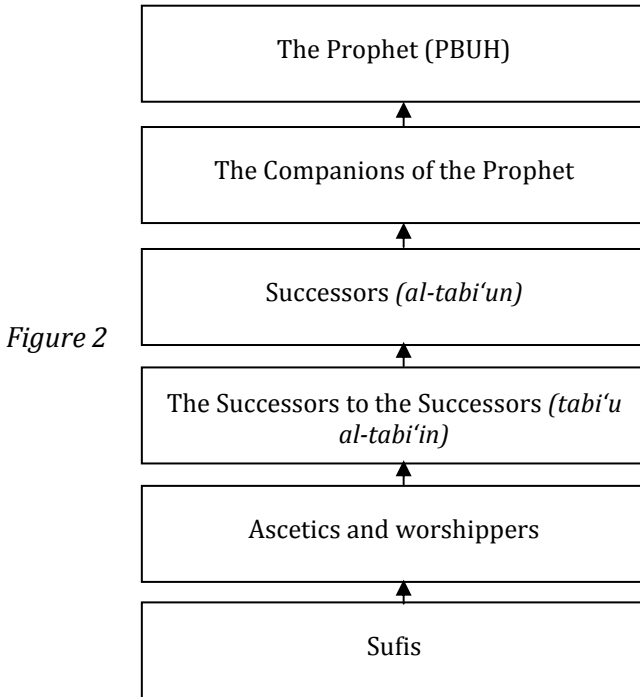
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<sup>481</sup> Ghalwash, Mustafa. *Al-Tasawwuf al-Islami bayn al-Ishraq wa-l-Filsafa*. Memoirs commissioned by the faculty of Usul al-Din, Al-Azhar University, 38-43.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Al-Jawhari, Muhammad. [1993]. “Al-Dirasat al-ʿIlmiyya li-l-Muʿtaqadat al-Shaʿbiyya” (1<sup>st</sup> ed.). Part 2 of *Dalil al-ʿAmal al-Midani li-Jamiʿi al-Turath al-Shaʿbi*. Alexandria: Dar al-Maʿrifa al-Jamiʿiyya, 179.

strive to link their shaykhs and saints to the Prophet (peace be upon him), to Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib (may God bless his face), and to some of the companions. Some shaykhs and saints use this purported holy lineage to derive their authority to lead the tariqas and gather followers. This *silsila* is depicted in Figure 2.<sup>484</sup>



In Sufi tariqas, shaykhs belonging to the *ashraf* have prepared a “family tree” whose names branch across time and place, stopping along the way at Sufi *aqtab* such as Badawi, Shadhili, al-Rifa’i and al-Dasuqi. The paths always lead to the Prophet (peace be upon him). Also included are Imam ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, his children al-Hassan and

<sup>484</sup> Al-Iraqi, Atef. (1984). *Thawrat al-'Aql fi al-Filsafa al-'Arabiyya* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.) Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 129.

al-Hussain, and his grandchildren. From this standpoint, tariqas have taken on a theocratic structure; succession of a shaykh is limited to his descendants in order to ensure that the shaykh's lineage can always be traced to the Prophet, as Sufis contend.<sup>485</sup>

## Conclusion

Genuine Sufi mysticism and tariqa-based Sufism are distinct from one another. As the present paper has shown, the difference pertains to tariqas, in which impostors exist among the saints. While tariqas originate from lofty philosophical beliefs steeped in metaphysics, spirituality and *wijdaniyyat* (matters of direct physical and spiritual experience), they have devolved into the present socioreligious phenomenon.

There have been persistent calls to reform tariqas by pushing them to align with or express genuine Sufi mysticism. This is because Sufi mysticism has a margin of power to promote progress and end the vicious cycle which we are witnessing in today's world. The essence, structure, ideas, and history of mysticism have features which can help achieve this.

a. Mysticism has an ample and profound linguistic legacy. Generally speaking, it dispenses with details and transcends the time, place, and social context in which it is produced. This makes it comprehensible, acceptable, and malleable for different cultures and religions.

Likewise, according to recent research in various branches of the humanities, mysticism appears to be more accommodating of diversity. This is true both in terms of its abstract, theoretical aspects and its practical applications. The richness of mysticism – in terms of

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<sup>485</sup> For more on this topic, see records of meetings of the Supreme Council for Sufi Orders (al-Majlis al-'Ala li-l Turuq al-Sufiyya). Great care is taken to ensure that a sheikh's successor is one of his descendants, according to the principle of *al-aqrab fal-aqrab*, whereby close relations have a stronger claim than distant ones. When the sheikh of the tariqa dies, various individuals come forward to claim his position.

both form and content, physical experience and intuition, demonstration and gnosis— opens the door to scholars of language, literature, law, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, political science, and history. This richness is readily apparent if one takes a look at the bibliography of Sufism and mysticism across various languages.

b. Mysticism carries out a pure spiritual experiment which is not limited by the differences imposed by the prescriptions of different religions. Rather it transcends such differences in search of the truth. This does not mean doing away with religious rules and requirements. Rather, it simply means not treating dogmas as the end-all and be-all of religion and religiosity. Instead, they should be the means for drawing inspiration from the far-off fountains of faith.

c. Mysticism spans from the divine to the human level. It does not mire itself in details or formalities of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) or theology (*lahut*). Nor is it overly preoccupied with the records and traditions which ostensibly belong to the history of the prophets, companions, and followers in Islam, the saints and apostles in Christianity, and the rabbis and priests in Judaism. Such matters drive a wedge in between the followers of different religions in spite of their shared origin and source. They also open the floodgates to human tyranny over the divine, fabrication instead of revelation, and baseless claims of lineage. Only mysticism is capable of bringing together people of different creeds and principles.

d. Mysticism comprises a number of noble and lofty values which are needed in every time and place, including love, tolerance, and contentment. These values serve as an effective bedrock on which to build a lasting bridge between people of different religions, cultures, and civilizations.



# AL GHAZALI AND THE POLITICAL

*Moh'd Khair Eiedat*

## I. Introduction

Al-Ghazali is an Islamic philosopher with an enormous intellectual power. He is also a controversial scholar. To make sense of his wide intellectual interests and his evolving and changing ideas is truly a challenge.

Islamic philosophers and theologians including al-Ghazali tend to avoid taking their ideas to their logical conclusions or to examine systematically their potential and actual implications. Thus to make sense of his diverse and in many instances contradictory ideas, would require no less than a total and comprehensive reconstruction of his thought. One needs to read al-Ghazali backward from the most recent to that earlier writings. Three works stand out in the first category includes (Al-Mustasfa, 2008) ;( Al-Ihya, 2000); and (Al Rasael, 2011). In the later category lies (Al-Tahafut, 2010); (Al-Iqtisad fe AL Itaqad, 2004) and (Mizan Al-Amal, 1983). This may advance our understanding of Al-Ghazali without, however, solving the apparel contradiction and inconsistency in his works. Does Al-Mustafa fit the spirit of Al-Ihya? Is Al-Munqid min al Jalal (2011) an extension to Al-Tahafut or a different line of reasoning?

We can only speculate. Al-Ghazali himself never attempted that revisit, although in theory he was open to the possibility.

Keeping this in mind, I will make two claims:

First, AL-Ghazalis major contribution to Islamic thought is in the realm of ethics. Both Al-Ihya and Mizan-Al-Amal stand out as the most representative.

Second, and as a consequence, his all other works should be assessed and reexamined in reference to that ethical frame.

Finally, I will rethink his ideas of the political (i.e. power and authority) in the context of the ethical. However unlike AL-Ghazali who presented the ethical in a form of parallel existence (few/many) or his tendency of downgrade life (i.e. marginal relevance of the ethical), I will pursue a single ethical order in which the idea of the ethical regains its centrality and value.

## II. Al-Ghazali Ethical World

Al-Ghazali's Sufism is product of individualistic instinct but also the result of default option. Based on logic, experience and history Al-Ghazali concluded that the possibility of moral society was not feasible. Moral man in a moral society was the order of the world. Withdrawing and disengagement from society is the only moral option for the very few.

However, the disconnection between morality of man and the society is only one option. There are other possibilities which would make reading Al-Ghazali more interesting and relevant namely the association between morality of man and society. AL-Ihya itself can offer that connection.

Ethics is a consideration of others. Utilitarian's called it moral sense. By this definition Al-Ihya and Mizan Al -Amal are certainly works of ethics. The very idea of justice is a consideration of others. For Al-Ghazali the idea of justice is partly legal (Sharia based rights) as well as moral principle (empathy and sympathy). Justice is avoiding harm and injury to others. (AL—Ihya; 2000:95). Degree of harm is measured against private or public injury. Confiscation of private level andis private harm, forming monopoly is public harm.

The defining feature of Al-Ghazali's idea of justice is his concern towards the weak and vulnerable in society which goes beyond legalism. In one respect, Al-Gahzali argued that causing harm or injury to the poor and orphans "is greater evil than injuring powerful and devious. Degree of harm varies with the state of those suffering injury" (Al-Ihya: 2:120). That consideration of others extended to the economic sphere. He recommended the forgiveness and writing off indebtedness of those who are unable to pay (AL-Ihya:2:105). In case

of a dispute between creditors and those indebted Al-Ghazali advised taking the side of the latter. He argued that “creditors offer loans for being rich. Those who borrow on the other hand, do so because of need” (AL-Ihya: 2:105) support and help should be given to buyers not sellers (AL-Ihya:2:105).

Al-Ghazali's concern for the weak and vulnerable this injustice, extends to the idea of commanding right and forbidding wrong. He described the principle as the ‘greatest pillar’ in Islam (AL-Ihya: 2:377). The principle is related to promoting public interest and avoiding or preventing public harm (AL-Ihya: 2:283).

Yet, one of the unintended consequences of carrying out the principles is causing harm to those given choice or unable to decide might prefer not to get involved including family members, relatives, associates and neighbors. Thus carrying out the principle would most likely expose others to harm violating both their rights (not to get involved and status (weak and vulnerable), it is relevance to such possibility, AL-Ghazali argued for the suspension of the principle. Disregard of potential harm to others would venter the implementation of the principle unlawful (AL -Ihya: 2:393 398). It was therefore not up to those seeking salvation causing harm and violating others right. One major right is that of being left alone and uninvolved.

In this section it is agreed that morality of individuals and that of society are interrelated and constituted a single unitary scheme. The fact that pursue of societal moral order may prove to be difficult if not impossible should not be taken to sever that connection between morality of man and that of society. Indeed, individual salvation disconnected from pursuing just societal order is morally suspected and abdication of moral responsibilities to others. If one were to take AL-Ihya seriously then one has to take moral societal order seriously. The choice of being left alone as a right should not, however, be at the expense of undermining the central theme of AL-Ihya namely that moral and ethical principle is social in nature.

In the following I look at the implications of Al-Ghazali ethical principle as unitary and comprehensive scheme for the Idea of the political.



### III. The Idea of the political.

Ending his Mizan AL –Amal Al Ghazali stated “skepticism is the way to the truth, those who abandon skepticism cannot reflect, and those who cannot reflect are unable to see, and those who cannot see remain blind and misguided “(Mizan AL-Amal: 137). Reflecting and assessing his intellectual life in al-munqid, he stated were written for purpose of acquiring status and honor “that was my intention and purpose” (Al-munqid: 76)

I stated this very long introductory note to emphasize the point that AL-Ghazali's ideas of the political should be discussed as evolving and changing idea. AL-Ghazali wrote on the idea of the political (power and authority) in four different places including Al-Ihya, kitab al-adab fi al din (Al-Rasael, 2011:89-119), sir al-amin (AL rasel, 2011:3-39). And mizan al amal.

Kitab al adab and sir al amin fall into transitional Islamic ideas of the political in which authority is given and usually praised. Literally style of both are interior to al –Ihya and that of Mizan al Amal. More important the notion of the political in these two works is inconsistent with the idea of the political as developed most importantly in AL-Ihya. I will therefore make no serious attempt to examine the idea of the political in these two works, not worth the effort, and focus instead on his idea of the political as it appears in Al-Ihya with occasional reference to Al-Mizan.

Notable absence from AL-Ghazali's treatment of the political are attribute of exceptionalism thus holiness to the idea of power and authority, and any separated or any serious attempt to view the idea of Jihad as integral part to the political. Jihad at the best remained accidental concern to AL-Ghazali's intellectual effort .the only justification given to the use of power is that of self-defense (i.e. protection of community) (Al-Ihya: 3:279-280).

Political power is for AL Ghazali essentially utilities and functional in nature, product of division of labour in society. It is purely human rather than divine activity. He noted that wherever there was

a human settlement no matter how small it would be characterial by disputes and disagreement (Eiadat: 2011:307)

So inhabitation of a country when addressing their basic needs, conflict and disagreement would follow. Left to themselves infighters would be certain, leading to their ruin. This also applies to farmers and shipards attending to land and water falling short of their need would lead to conflict. This left by necessity to the emergence of other professions including profession of solidery to protect the country by sword and fend off robbers. *And so is the profession of ruler ship*, conflict resolution and the need for jurisprudence, which is the law needed to control *human being* in order to minimize dispute (Al-Ihya:3:279-290)

Political authority, therefore is “natural’ product of what we describe as human condition, which can be understood, thus analyzed as human phenomenon rooted in historical human experience.

It is part of common human experience (Al Mustafa: 275). In other words, AL-Ghazalis approach to political power is that of a social phenomenon to be understood and analyzed, not as transcendent (idea or divine this mystified and celebrated. This is a significant departure from his traditional idea of authority as appear in Kitab AL adab and sir Al amin.

Another aspect of political power as Al-Ghazali noted is that of almost natural tendency to abuse it. Political authority is presented as tax collector which appropriates part of surplus of production by others (Al-Ihya: 2:118). Its tendency to be abusive thus unjust by ignoring rules and regulations thus becoming arbitrary were to al-Ghazali both historical and empirical facts (Al-Ihya: 2:110-111; 83-84; 123-124). This led al-Ghazali to make unfortunate association between power and injustice. The operational definition of arbitrary rule is that of violation of rights. Those rights include property right, possession and fair taxation (Al-Ihya: 2:211-2; 132; 190). Labour rights, unpaid, underpaid, in human condition of work (AL-Ihya: 2:169; 133; 135). Violation of these tights and other abuses including cruelly, torture, spreading of fear and murder are all aspects of arbitrary rule (Al-Ihya: 2:425-436).

The idea of political authority created a real dilemma to Al-Ghazali which can partly explain his essentially escapist position on morality. This needs not be the case. The question which al-Ghazali failed to answer in any meaningful sense is wherever it is possible for individual person to achieve salvation through act of purification and experiencing God with that of moral public order and political power based on rules thus not arbitrary? Can these diverse aspects be a product of single ethical frame? The answer should be yes.

In the following, I will simply follow Al-Ghazalis dispersed ideas and make his implied assumptions more explicit. By doing that, I hope, a coherent single scheme of ethics would become apparent. A scheme which allows individuals to pursue path of salvation, in which society is governed, or at least aware of, by moral principles for the protection of rights, of both individuals and groups in society.

Al-Ghazalis name is linked to that of individual salvation model or purification model as representative and articulate of Suffi tradition in Islam. This is, however, partly true and product of as stated a default option. More important, one has to consider the “purification model” from an applied ethical perspective. Considering the non-conventional nature of the model (reducing man to a breathing experience) and thus its heavy demands on the individuals would make it as al-Ghazali himself recognized, the choice of the very few. For purpose of sustainability those individuals choosing this path of salvation would either rely on charity and good will of other, AL-Ghazalis choice, but can be offered more dignified option of survivability without obligation of labour. This is a political option which can take the form of law.

Indeed, the principle of reciprocity can apply to the purification model. Those individuals choosing this method of salvation would accept a temporary limitation in their political and social involvement in the return of ensuring sustainability without the obligation of labour. Many would see their passivity a welcoming option it is also in the context the principle of commanding tight and forbidding wrong would cause to operate.

The right not to speak or staying silent is an option which should not prevent society working out its ethical and political order. In fact, this is unavoidable conclusion. Religious and non- religious ideas would be available to work out such scheme. The central ethical principle is that of justice. The operational definition of justice is the moral and legal obligation of society towards the misfortunes vulnerable in society. There is no doubt that AL-Ghazalis idea of jurisprudence is essentially rule of law in which justice can achieved (i.e. procedural justice). Morality cannot be reduced to legalism hence the notion of compassion and the centrality of moral sense. The fact that such idea of justice is based on religious grounds should not obscure the fundamental idea of justice as moral and ethical principle, and that the idea of the law is essential to any notion of justice. Thus any political power which is not law based is an arbitrary power and thus in justice.

Al Ghazali's confidence in the possibility of establishing political power based on a notion of law was certainly not high considering both reality and history. To guard against what seemed to him the natural order of being, namely the prevailing and persistent arbitrary power, Al Ghazali advocated a form of civil disobedience (Eiadat: 211:312). He also placed high moral responsibility on religious scholars to abstain from providing.

### **Legitimacy to arbitrary and un justice power:**

By merely being with unjust ruler (religious scholars) they may relieve him from heavy burden of loneliness, thus making it far much easier for rulers who violate every right and indulge in wrong doing, to act un justly. They (rulers) use you (religious scholars) as a tool to commit, their unjust acts, a bridge to cross over their errors. They use you to create uncertainty in the minds of other religious scholars and to influence the hearts of the ignorant (Al-Ihya: 2:178).

To sum up, Al Ghazalis view has three components:

first, purification model in which individual experiencing the idea of God. This individual can claim the right of being left alone, right of silence.

Second: a society based on moral principle of justice. And finally, political power which is law based thus just and not arbitrary. AL-Ghazali based on his observation of persistent of a moral society and arbitrary power which seemed to him as unmovable and unchangeable as a natural force this led him to escape both society and power.

Leaving al Ghazalis pessimism and escapism aside, Al-Ghazalis ethical order cannot be reduced to that of the salvation model. In fact, his contemporary relevance to the discussion of the moral and political is very evident.

In the following, I will address the question of whether al Ghazalis world view as constructed here can lead us to consider Islam as a reasonable comprehensive doctrine?

#### **IV. Al Ghazalis world view as reasonable comprehensive doctrine**

The comprehensive nature of religion refers to totality of life experience including a notion of the good man, moral society and a view of the political (i.e. nature of authority and legitimate basis for the exercise of power). In that sense, Al-Ghazalis world view is comprehensive doctrine. Can we, however speak of such comprehensive doctrine as being reasonable?

Reasonable here is used as endorsement and genuine commitment to constitutional democracy (Rawls, 2005). The fundamental question is whether Al-Ghazalis comprehensive doctrine can survive and maintain its integrity in the context of constitutional democracy?

Al-Ghazalis salvationist, individualistic model can indeed survive and even flourish in a constitutional democracy. Right of silence and that of disengagement can certainly be guaranteed in such context. This is also true of Al Ghazalis idea societal moral order. Al Ghazalis idea of ethical society has two attributes which are compatible

with constitutional democracy. In the first instance the idea of protecting and caring for the weak and vulnerable on society, thus justice, is a principle which can naturally find a place in any meaningful public reasoning. The other aspect of that ethical order is that of right of communities to live according to its collective notion of morality (marriage, family, worship, rituals). Collective identification with a given moral community would not require evoking any notion of penal code associated with implementation of Sharia as commonly known. The reason is that AL-Ghazalis moral community is about positive commitment in which deliberation violation of code of conduct does not arise. Others have a choice of staying thus adhering to such moral code or can opt out (i.e. joining other communities).

Finally, AL-Ghazalis idea of political order is essentially utilitarian in nature. There is as mention previously no celebration of power or authority. Ideally, political power should provide protection to rights of individuals seeking salvation and upholding right of moral and ethical communities in society. Legitimacy of power can indeed be paraphrased in Rawlsian terms. Al-Ghazali himself never advocated legitimacy of political power say for purpose of empire building (i.e. expansionism) nor as a way of promoting faith. In other words, Jihad as widely used never fitted in al Ghazalis ethical world. Thus al Ghazalis possible and logical endorsement to constitutional democracy is product of conviction that his comprehensive doctrine would maintain its integrity and indeed might flourish under constitutional democratic order.



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## RENUNCIATION AND OPPOSITION: EARLYSUFISM AND POLITICAL POWER

Osama Ghawji

“Sufism means that you do not possess anything, nor does anything possess you.”

- Samnun ibn Hamza

“The final station (*maqam*) for the Sufi seeker is freedom.”

- al-Junayd

Sufism seeks freedom from all things, from every “no” and “but” that stands in the way of devotion to God.<sup>486</sup> Abdallah Laroui was partly correct when he wrote that “Sufism is an experience ... that has at its essence the absolute freedom that comes from withdrawal from all external influences, whether natural, social, or psychological.”<sup>487</sup> On the one hand, it is true that freedom is an essential principle and station on the Sufi’s spiritual path.<sup>488</sup> However, Laroui

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<sup>486</sup> Some ecstatic utterances (*shathat*) explicitly suggest a desire to be liberated from the divine as well. See al-Hallaj (“Oh people, save me from God!”) in ‘Ali ibn An-jabal-Sa’i, *Akhbar al-Hallaj*, edited by Muwaffaq Fawzi Jabr, Beirut: Dar al-Tali’a, second edition, 1997, p. 70-71; See also the saying of Abu Talib al-Makki, who was ostracized by society (“There is nothing more damaging to creation than its creator”) in Ibn al-Jawzi, *Tablis Iblis*, edited by Ayman Salih Sha’ban, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith, 2003, p. 171.

<sup>487</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhum al-Hurriya*, Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabi, fifth edition, 2012, p. 28.

<sup>488</sup> Al-Qushayri mentioned a path to “freedom” in his famous epistle. See Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, edited by ‘Abdel-Halim Mahmoud and Muhammad ibn al-Sharif, Cairo: Dar al-Sha’b, 1989, p. 378.

is not entirely correct, because Sufism does not seek absolute freedom, nor freedom for freedom's sake; rather, Sufis understand freedom to be a necessary aspect of worship, the passive counterpart to the positive act of worshipping God.<sup>489</sup>

It would also be misleading to say that the Sufi experience is directed towards purely political aims. Sufism is first and foremost an individual religious expression of the "ultimate concern," as Paul Tillich put it,<sup>490</sup> which transcends and absorbs all others. Thus, liberation from these other concerns is both necessary and self-evident.<sup>491</sup> Sufis have engaged with freedom in many different forms: their literature abounds with different meanings of liberation from the powers of the state, from jurists, and from material wealth,<sup>492</sup> not to men-

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<sup>489</sup> Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi says of those who have erred in the principles of Sufism: "The misguided believed that freedom is more perfect than serving God; what they did not realize is that a servant of God is not really a servant, until his heart is free from everything except God Almighty, for that is when he truly becomes a servant of God." Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi, *al-Luma'*, edited by 'Abdel-Halim Mahmoud and Taha 'Abd al-Baqi Surur, Egypt: Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, 1960, p. 531.

<sup>490</sup> Paul Tillich, *Bawa'ith al-Iman* (Dynamics of Faith), trans. Sa'id al-Ghanimi, Cologne (Germany): Al-Kamel Verlag, first edition, 2007, p.15-19.

<sup>491</sup> The notion of gathering together all concerns within a single concern lies at the heart of the Sufi experience, and what it strives to achieve. As al-Hallaj puts it: "My heart had many disparate loves, but since I saw You I gathered them into one." Sufism derives this concept of "the union of union" (*jam' al-jam'*) from a hadith of the prophet Muhammad, who said "and whoever makes all concerns into a single concern for the Hereafter, God will relieve him of all other concerns." Abu Bakr ibn Ishaq al-Kalabadi, *al-Ta'arruf li-Madhhab Ahl al-Tasawwuf*, edited by Ahmad Shams al-Din, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2011, p. 138; The reader may observe that this is the organizing principle through which William James viewed religious experiences, that is, as striving to unite the divided soul (*nafs*), a matter which goes beyond the scope of this study. See William James (1842-1910), *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*, New York, London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902, p. 166.

<sup>492</sup> This is the essence of the claim that Hadi al-'Alawi makes in his book, *Madarat Sufiyya*. He argues that Sufism was a means of escaping the authority of the state, material possessions, and religion, and represented a revolutionary, communalist trend in Islamic tradition. Hadi al-'Alawi, *Madarat Sufiyya: Turath al-Thawra al-Masha'iyya fi al-Sharq*, Dar al-Mada, Beirut, third edition, 2014.

tion from the ego (*nafs*), physical body, and personal demons. This has even extended to efforts to free themselves from the structures of language,<sup>493</sup> through ecstatic utterances (*shath*), symbolism (*ramz*) and esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*), as well as through trying to express that void “that cannot be expressed.”<sup>494</sup> However, Sufi experience, just as it emerges from the heart to take the form of words, and travels beyond the bounds of the individual to reach the collective, must also be translated into social practice. In other words, the individual Sufi experience must be transformed into a social phenomenon located in the political sphere. Even at times when Sufis have decided, in theory, to remain isolated from politics, this withdrawal—as I will demonstrate— is in itself a profoundly political act, with a specific connotation and effect.

In this study we are concerned with examining the relationship between Sufism and political authorities before the sixth century AH, a period that we will call “early Sufism.” The Sufi strain of Islam had begun to crystallize through the books and compilations it produced in the second half of the fourth century AH (10<sup>th</sup> century AD), and matured as a school of thought by the middle of the fifth century AH. By the end of the fifth century, and through the work of al-Ghazali, Sufism arrived at a kind of reconciliation with the traditions of Shari'a. At the institutional level, Sufism began to gradually turn away from its more individualist approach, and became more organized into orders and institutions.<sup>495</sup> In light of the political decentralization that had been part of the Islamic world since the time of the Seljuqs and the disintegration of a centralized caliphate, Sufism's role in politics unexpectedly changed. It became less firmly attached to the tradition of shunning or confronting political opponents,<sup>496</sup> and more receptive to participating in state institutions and schools. These

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<sup>493</sup> Yusuf Zaydan, *al-Mutawaliyat: Dirasat fi al-Tasawwuf*, Cairo:al-Dar al-Misriyya al-Lubnaniyya, first edition, 1999, p. 25.

<sup>494</sup> Khalid Balqasim, *al-Sufiya wa-l-Faragh: al-Kitaba 'inda al-Niffari*, Beirut and Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, first edition, 2012, p. 12.

<sup>495</sup> Mohammad ibn al-Tayyib, *Islam al-Mutasawwifa*, Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, first edition, 2007, p. 95-96.

<sup>496</sup> Nile Green, *al-Sufiya: Nasha'tuha wa-Tarikhuha* (Sufism: A Global History), trans. Safiyya Mukhtar, Dar al-Hindawi, 2017, p. 111.

state institutions came to oversee some Sufi institutions as drivers of societal equilibrium, that is, to strengthen societal cohesion in spite of the weakness of the bureaucratic apparatus of the state.<sup>497</sup> This brings us to the end of “early Sufism.” As for the beginning of early Sufism, there is not a consensus among historians on that matter.<sup>498</sup> The pertinent point for this study is that Sufis considered their predecessors (*aslaf*) to be Sufis also, even if these predecessors were not Sufi per se, at least in the particular meaning that would solidify later when the Sufi tradition matured.

### **Sufism: Renunciation of Political Power**

After the rise of Umayyads, opposition to the state was the defining characteristic of the early ‘ulama’.<sup>499</sup> There were differing degrees of opposition, from the pronounced opposition of the Qu’ran reciters, Kharijites, and Shi’ites, to less explicit forms of opposition that worked to establish Shari’a religious standards in society. This obliged the political authority to not violate these norms (we find the latter approach among many jurists and scholastic theologians to dif-

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<sup>497</sup> We must be careful to not reduce our characterization of the relationship between Sufism and the state, since the beginning of the sixth century, to a dependent relationship in which the state oversaw the Sufi *zawiyas* and shaykhs, and in return expected their blessings, and that Sufis would ensure popular loyalty to the state. *Tariqa*-based Sufism was a form of political belonging that transcended the many different state borders within the Islamic world: its networks of orders connected Muslims in one spiritual, social, and religious unit. Sufism thus helped make up for the lack of an active and centralized caliphate and strengthened social unity among Muslims. For more on this, see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, vol. 2, p. 220-222; Armando Salvatore, *Susiyulujiyat al-Islam: al-Ma’rifa wa-l-Sulta wa-l-Madaniyya*. (Sociology of Islam: Knowledge, Power, and Civility), trans. Rabie Wahba, Beirut: Al-Shabka al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, first edition, 2017, p. 119, among others.

<sup>498</sup> Nile Green offers a new approach to the relationship between Sufism and its antecedents in ascetic and Malamatiyya movements, among others. The previous generation of Orientalists had tended to view these movements as earlier forms of Sufi tradition, whereas Green has argued that they were competing traditions, but that Sufism ultimately was able to incorporate these different movements under one umbrella. See Nile Green, *al-Sufiyya: Nasha’tuha wa-Tarikhuha*.

<sup>499</sup> Hodgson, vol. 1, 251.

fering degrees).<sup>500</sup> If all the ‘ulama’ had been Sunni, they would have been willing to accept the Abbasid settlement.<sup>501</sup> However, a key segment of the ‘ulama’ was not fully integrated into the state apparatus and retained some degree of separation from it, which made it possible to maintain the independence of Shari‘a from political authority, preventing the formation of a state with absolute authority.<sup>502</sup>

The principle that al-Hasan al-Basri (d.110/728) set forth remained well-established throughout early Sufism: “neither revolt nor reticence.”<sup>503</sup> Al-Hasan outlined a model of how a just ascetic leader should act:<sup>504</sup> he should keep his distance from the judiciary, disavow the abominable (*inkar al-munkar*) actions of the rulers, but not seek to clash with power. Instead he would yield often to what the ruler had said, and refuse to challenge him directly.<sup>505</sup> Al-Hasan al-Basri’s position appears, to a lesser extent, in al-Ghazali’s (d. 505/1111) letter entitled *Mawaqif al-‘Ulama bayn Yaday al-Khulafa’ wa-l-Umara’*. In this letter, al-Ghazali does not recommend that scholars seek out rulers. Instead, he considers it better that the ruler come to the scholar (*‘alim*) or the Sufi because he is honestly seeking advice. However, if the Sufi absolutely must meet the ruler, it is the Sufi’s duty to not refrain from advising, and to direct this advice to the heart and conscience of the ruler, rather than specific policies.

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<sup>500</sup> Hadi al-‘Alawi suggests that the spectrum of opposition among intellectuals can be characterized as follows: poets and writers who were involved in political power and the royal court, followed by jurists who were quick to form alliances with the state, followed by scholastic theologians, then philosophers (who remained neutral, for the most part), then Sufis, whose opposition was expressed through their disengagement, but who also did not bend to the political authority of the day. There have been a wide variety of objections to this hierarchy, which demonstrates al-‘Alawi’s bias towards his imaginary notion of a communalist form of Sufism.

<sup>501</sup> Hodgson, p. 272.

<sup>502</sup> Noah Feldman, *Su‘ud wa-Suqut al-Dawla al-Islamiyya* (The Fall and Rise of the Islamic State), trans. al-Taher Boussahia, Beirut: al-Shabka al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, first edition, 2014, p. 67-70.

<sup>503</sup> Abdel Rahman Badawi, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf al-Islami: min al-Bidaya hata Niyahat al-Qarn al-Thani*, Kuwait: Wakalat al-Matbu‘at, first edition, 1975, p. 154.

<sup>504</sup> See his letter to ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, recorded in al-‘Iqd al-Farid, Badawi, p. 177-179.

<sup>505</sup> Badawi, p. 192.

The corruption of power and its injustice, opulence, and immersion in worldly matters was firmly established and self-evident to the Muslim conscience. Muslims compared this state of affairs to the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the first caliphs. Some of the jurists agreed to work for the state and to invent legal maneuvers in jurisprudence that would give the state some degree of legitimacy; others endeavored to advise rulers and set forth Shari'a from within state institutions. During this early period of Sufism, Sufis adopted only the most distant forms of challenging political power. They were among the last to become connected to the state and to communicate with its representatives.<sup>506</sup>

This disengagement from politics has often been viewed as a negative form of withdrawal that gave autocratic political authority the space to do as it pleased.<sup>507</sup> However, the Sufi's isolation was clearly a kind of silent opposition, which repeatedly revealed the corruption of the authorities and their lack of moral and religious legitimacy, and also sought to establish a parallel social authority. The indirect opposition of the Sufis reached such an extent that there was no other course than to see them as part of the more vocal opposition, which sent an unequivocal message that the authorities were corrupt – even if Sufism did not offer an alternative to them.

In a tale that borders on legend, Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. 165/782) rejected his father's inheritance, although he was next in line to the throne, and set off westwards, where he worked in orchards and fought the Byzantines. During the golden age of Baghdadi Sufism, that is, during the second half of the third century and first

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<sup>506</sup> The origins of Sufism's proximity to the state can be traced back to the Seljuq period, in the second half of the fifth century AH. Al-Qushayri (d. 465/1074) was connected with Seljuq ruler at that time, as was al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) after him. The nature of this close relationship became clearer when Abu Hafs al-Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) aligned himself with caliph al-Nasir (d. 623/1225) through *futuwwa* organizations. Al-Nasir supported Sufi *futuwwa* groups, and then took leadership of these organizations in an attempt to consolidate the internal social structure of the state, which was concentrated in Baghdad and the surrounding areas.

<sup>507</sup> Abdallah Laroui, *Mafhum al-Hurriyya*, p. 28-29; Mohammad Iqbal, *Tajdid al-Tafkir al-Diniyy*, trans. Muhammad Yusuf 'Adas, Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, Beirut, p. 252.

half of the fourth century AH, Baghdad became an active center for Sufi circles. The first act of Abu Bakr al-Shibli (d. 334/946), who was of Turkish descent, after he repented, was to leave his previous position as chamberlain (*hajib*) for al-Muwaffaq (d. 278/891) in the Abbasid Caliphate. He wandered through the provinces asking for forgiveness for any injustices he had committed in his previous work.<sup>508</sup> These two individuals were not unique: the notion of shunning political power was well-established even in the circles of ‘ulama’ other than the Sufis, but became more firmly entrenched on a practical level in Sufi circles. Sufis were not satisfied with dividing actions into *halal* and *haram* (permissible and forbidden); rather, they were interested in intent. If a jurist concerned with manifest forms of knowledge (*‘ulum al-zahir*) argued that accepting gifts from the ruler was a sin that needed to be forgiven, the Sufi (the jurist of the hidden Truth) would argue this revealed the corruption of his heart and love of the material world. Al-Junayd (d. 297/910) was known as *sayyid-al-ta’ifa*, that is, as the exemplar of Sufi tradition. He became involved in disputes with two leading Sufis after they were appointed judges. The first of these was ‘Amr ibn ‘Uthman al-Makki (d. circa 291/904) who accepted a position as qadiin Jedda, so al-Junayd cut ties with him and refused to pray for him.<sup>509</sup> The second was Ruwaym al-Baghdadi (d. 303/915) who al-Junayd likewise harshly admonished when he was appointed judge, saying, “Whoever wants to look at someone who hid his love of this world for twenty years, should look at [Ruwaym]!”<sup>510</sup>

Sufis distanced themselves from everything that had to do with the ruling authority. They abstained from spinning thread by the light of the sultan’s torches, and refused food grown with the sultan’s water. They rebuked representatives of his authority as complicit in

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<sup>508</sup> Farid al-Din al-‘Attar, *Tazkirat al-Awliya’*, edited by Mohammad Adib al-Jadir, Dar al-Maktabi, Damascus, 2009, p. 531.

<sup>509</sup> al-Khatib, *Tarikh Baghdad*, quoted in Louis Massignon, *Alam al-Hallaj* (La Passion d’ al-Hosayn-ibn-Mansour-al-Hallaj), trans. Husayn Mustafa al-Hallaj, Beirut: Dar Cadmus, 2004, part one, first edition, p. 105-106.

<sup>510</sup> Abu Nu‘aym al-Isfahani, *Hilyat al-Awliya’ wa-Tabaqat al-Asfiya’*, edited by Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, part ten, p. 202.



injustice, and would not offer them spiritual guidance, just as they declined to work under the patronage and protection of the palace.<sup>511</sup> For the most part, this opposition did not seem to be very effective in the social sphere or in stirring up public opinion against the sultan. The exception to this rule was al-Hallaj, who had an enormous effect on the symbolic level, and when circumstances are right, that can lead to tangible social change.

The Sufi approach calls for freeing the inner or hidden meaning (*batin*), which endows the Sufi with the greatest spiritual wealth, and liberates their heart from all fears except fear of God. This was the most prevalent model in the individualist approach of early Sufism, since at that time Sufism did not have a fixed hierarchy or institutions. The palace did not like this kind of Sufi, whom they could not reach an understanding with, whose actions they could not predict, and who could not, in theory, be won over through a carrot-and-stick approach. However, the people embraced this model of the Sufi, with its genuine liberation in both this world and the next— a form of liberation that was not achieved through what Sufis possessed, but rather what they renounced. In truth, the political authority would not have insisted on repudiating those who turned away from its majesty and splendor, except that these Sufis were beginning to win over the hearts of the people, who saw them as moral and ethical role models who faced the threat of death with heroic courage.<sup>512</sup> This became a concerning matter for the ideology of the political authority and unsettled its legitimacy.

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<sup>511</sup> See the selection of testimonies in Mohammad Helmi 'Abd al-Wahab, *Wula wa-Awlia': al-Sulta wa-l-Mutasawwifafi Islam al-'Asr al-Wasit*, Beirut: al-Shabka al-'Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, first edition, 2009, p. 219-226. It is worth noting that those who refused to accept patronage from unjust rulers are mentioned by al-Sha'rani, a 10<sup>th</sup>-century (AH) Sufi, who was accused of appeasing rulers and trying to improve their image.

<sup>512</sup> We know that Abu Husain al-Nuri offered to be tried before his companions during the *mihna* of Shaykh Ghulam Khalil, and that al-Hallaj came out showing off his chains as he went to be crucified. Ibn al-Jawzi, p. 179, and Massignon, p. 489.

Sufism appealed to the general public, and to the lower classes of the 'ulama'<sup>513</sup> because it set itself apart from them. Sufis engaged with the lowest strata of society—"the scoundrels (*shuttarin*), the vagabonds (*'ayyarin*), and young men of *futuwwa* clubs."<sup>514</sup> They did not mind mixing with those addicted to hashish, or alcohol, or the powerless—the cast-offs of society.<sup>515</sup> Sufis did not see themselves as better than any other part of creation, but rather as an "aid to the stranger...the hope of every worry."<sup>516</sup> Also, Sufis often chose to descend in the class hierarchy, by choosing trades as craftspeople,<sup>517</sup> because they saw working with one's hands as more noble than working in the market or making a living through knowledge.<sup>518</sup> They believed that serving creation, and providing people with sustenance and comfort, was better than all other work,<sup>519</sup> and even valued feeding the poor over undertaking the pilgrimage— at least after one had already made the *hajj* once.<sup>520</sup>

Sufis thus enjoyed a rather heroic image in the eyes of the public, as a result of their remarkable asceticism and adherence to strict devotional practices, as well as their disdain for the ruling authorities. Additionally, this image was heightened by the Sufi theory of *walaya* (sainthood) as manifested in the miracles (*karamat*) that were told about them. The result of all this was that Sufis reached the highest levels of charismatic authority among the population, who

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<sup>513</sup> An exception to this is the *Ahl al-Hadith* movement, and their connection to the *mutaww'a* in Baghdad and other lower classes of society. The *Ahl al-Hadith*, especially the Hanbalis, were similar to the Sufis of Baghdad in ways that merit further study, despite the prevailing perception that they were rivals.

<sup>514</sup> Muhammad Helmi 'Abd al-Wahab, *Wula wa-Awli'a': al-Sulta wa-l-Mutasawwifafi Islam al-'Asr al-Wasit*, p. 71.

<sup>515</sup> Abdel Wahab al-Sha'rani, *al-Kawkab al-Shahiq fi al-Farq bayna al-Murid al-Sadiq wa- Ghayr al-Sadiq*, edited by Hasan Muhammad Sharqawi, Cairo: Dar al-Ma'rif, 1991, p. 73.

<sup>516</sup> Al-Qushayri, p. 86.

<sup>517</sup> Hodgson, vol. 2, p. 202.

<sup>518</sup> Abu Talib al-Makki, *Qut al-Qulub*, edited by Sa'id Nasib Makarim, Beirut: Dar Sa-dir, part 2, p. 35-36.

<sup>519</sup> See some of the sayings of al-Jilani on this topic in Hadi al-'Alawi, p. 234.

<sup>520</sup> This is an accusation that was discussed by the qadi Abu 'Umar al-Maliki before he condemned al-Hallaj. Massignon, p. 458.

turned to Sufis during times of hardship or misfortune. In this way, popular Sufism flourished to the extent of inspiring jealousy— and a certain anxiety— in the rulers.<sup>521</sup>

In Baghdad, Al-Junayd's popularity rivaled that of the caliph.<sup>522</sup> It was said that "Baghdad had two caliphs: one was the Abbasid caliph, and the other was 'Abd al-Qadir [al-Junayd]." <sup>523</sup> The symbolic and charismatic power of these Sufis frightened men of state. As a result, even if Sufis were not seeking confrontation or openly denouncing the political authority, the state still felt the danger of a rival social power. The state realized that the rising popularity of Sufism meant increasing societal discontent about its unjust policies. There is a saying from the story of Abu Madyan al-Ghawth who was popular among the people, so some of the 'ulama' tried to agitate against him, and told the sultan, "he has many followers in every land."<sup>524</sup>

There was a large group of jurists who contributed to stirring up the latent conflict between Sufism and the political authorities. Most of the tribulations that Sufis went through were at the instigation of jurists, an instigation which found eager and ready accomplices among courtiers. Thus, both jurists and the court (*hashiya*) joined together in advising the political authorities that Sufis should be executed, imprisoned, or exiled, and that their writings should be destroyed. The jurists have the blood of Sufis on their hands, as they acted on the caliph's behalf in using death sentences against Sufis.<sup>525</sup> It is not surprising that the jurists took on this role in light of the fury that Sufism had provoked towards the 'ulama', and the disdain that

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<sup>521</sup> In one legendary narration, Ibn Kathir recounts that al-Barbahari (d. 329/941) once sneezed "while he was preaching to the people, and those present uttered the prayer for the sneezer, and then those that heard from them uttered the prayer for the sneezer, until all the people of Baghdad had uttered the prayer for the sneezer, and the commotion ended up at the doorstep of the caliphate, and the caliph was jealous." *Al-Bidaya wa-l-Nihaya*, part 11, p. 227.

<sup>522</sup> Muhammad Helmi 'Abd al-Wahab, p. 209.

<sup>523</sup> Hadi al-'Alawi, p. 243.

<sup>524</sup> Ahmad ibn Khalid al-Nasiri recounted this in his study of the lands of the "far Maghreb." Quoted in Hadi al-'Alawi, *Madarat al-Sufiyya*, p. 422.

<sup>525</sup> Massignon, p. 481.

some Sufis held towards the Shari'a sciences (as opposed to the hidden Truth). The critique that the first Sufis leveled against the jurists was that they had turned the religious sciences (*'ulum*) into external practices (*rusum*) without engaging with the true reality of piety (*taqwa*) and religious knowledge. This was an implicit critique of the state, and of forming alliances with it, as well as of the class tensions, opulence, and injustices that it produced.

On the level of philosophy and theory, Sufi ethics negated the need for a state at all, because the state was based on a Hobbesian ethics of conflict. If society eliminated the ethics of the ego, possession, and control—which seems all but impossible—and turned to the ethics of the unseen (*batin*), to *'ithar* (preferring others over oneself), *mahabba* (unconditional love) and *ifna'* (annihilation of the self and worldly goods), then there would no longer be a need for a state. This is the Sufi vision of utopia.<sup>526</sup> The first Muslims disagreed on whether having an imam was required by Shari'a or rationally necessary (*wajib 'aqli*) to prevent wrongdoing and achieve justice. Sufism did not present a clearly outlined position on this matter, but their path was based on the reformation of principle and purification (*tazkiya*) of society.<sup>527</sup> In this way, the Sufi's existence was, in and of itself, a symbolic subversion of the structure of the state, and therefore a source of anxiety and unease for political power.<sup>528</sup> This is because Sufi ethics rested upon selflessness and the renunciation of worldly goods, which revealed the moral and religious corruption of the state.

In addition, the theoretical underpinnings of Sufism offered a parallel and alternate world to that which was governed by political authority. Their kingdom was the kingdom of the unseen (*batin*), with a spiritual leader (*qutb*) at its helm, followed by various degrees

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<sup>526</sup> Taha Abdurrahman's book *Ruh al-Din* is a philosophical expression of this Sufi ideal, since it rejects the notion of politics on account of it starting conflict that serves itself, whereas the Sufi seeker aims to discard the ethics of the ego, through purification (*tazkiya*) of the soul and liberation of the self. Taha Abdurrahman, *Ruh al-Din: min Diq al-'Ilmaniyya ila Sa'at al-I'timaniyya*, Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2012.

<sup>527</sup> Mohammad Helmi 'Abd al-Wahab, p. 228.

<sup>528</sup> Mohammad Helmi 'Abd al-Wahab, p. 209.

of saints: *awtad*, *abdal*, and others, without which the world would collapse, for the affairs of humankind and nature alike were bound together in this order.<sup>529</sup> The people could turn to this higher authority instead of having to resort to the unjust sultans, which undermined political rulers, stripping them of their importance and central position in the social sphere. Indeed, the common people are “keen to speak with their political leaders when they come seeking prosperity and a good life. On the other hand, this mystical sect, working for God, is fond of speaking with men of high standing, but in order to see how the power of God would work in them, execute His decrees upon them, impose His will . . . and wreak vengeance upon them.”<sup>530</sup> Sufis treated rulers with respect, but not with deference.

### The Case of al-Hallaj

The case of al-Hallaj was a distinctive moment in the history of early Sufism’s relationship with political authority. In some ways, it was an exceptional case that departed from the pattern governing most of early Sufism’s relationship with political power (“neither revolt nor reticence”). However, in other regards it represents an intensification of that relationship, taken to its most extreme end.

A meticulous and skeptical reader will take pause with the official narrative describing al-Hallaj as a free-thinking heretic (*zindiq*), who deserved crucifixion and execution as a result of his suspect pronouncements indicating belief in incarnation (*hulul*) and unification (*itihad*), which violated the foundations of shari’a.<sup>531</sup> Of course, al-Hallaj was neither the first nor the last to contradict the principles of religion. A half century before al-Hallaj, Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 261/874) made claims that neither the jurists nor the populace

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<sup>529</sup> ‘Ali al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. Is’ad ‘Abd al-Wadi Qandil, Cairo: al-Markaz al-Qawmi li-l-Tarjama, 2007, part 2, p. 447-448.

<sup>530</sup> Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi, *Imta’ wa-l-Mu’anasa*, edited by Ahmad Amin and Ahmad al-Zain, Hindawi, 2019, p. 488, quoting Abu al-Hassan al-‘Amiri.

<sup>531</sup> This appears in the sayings of al-Dhahabi (“al-Hallaj was killed for *zandaqa* (heresy) by the sword of shari’a.”) See the biography of al-Hallaj in *Siyar A’lam al-Nubala’*.

would tolerate, which resulted in his being exiled by the people, but without the state getting involved or clearly stating its objection to him. Even stranger was the case of the doctor and philosopher Abu Bakr al-Razi (d. 311/925), a contemporary of al-Hallaj who wrote a book entitled *Makhariq al-Anbiya'* (The Fraudulent Tricks of the Prophets) that was actually well received by the political authorities; in fact, he was then appointed director of a hospital (*bimaristan*) in Baghdad.

Why, then, did Al-Hallaj face such a severe punishment? He was put in jail for eight years, after which he was flogged, crucified, dismembered, and decapitated. His body was burned and his ashes were scattered in the Tigris River. This terrifying spectacle of punishment aimed to instill fear in those watching and deter anyone from following in his footsteps. Al-Hallaj's books were also banned from circulation for more than one hundred years, and manuscript copyists were forced to destroy any copies they possessed. Additionally, why was al-Hallaj the subject of so much debate among Sufis themselves? Some of his contemporaries thought well of him, while his friend al-Shibli explicitly contradicted him during his execution. Al-Shibli asked al-Hallaj while he was on the cross, "What is Sufism?" His crucified friend said: "What you see before you."<sup>532</sup> Then he scolded him, citing the Qur'anic verse: {Have we not forbidden you to intercede for anyone in the world?} (Qur'an 15:70) Al-Shibli later said that he and al-Hallaj were similarly minded, but that al-Hallaj had been open about it, while al-Shibli kept quiet.<sup>533</sup>

The many different interpretations of why this happened to al-Hallaj all concur that the tragedy had a political dimension. Clearly,

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<sup>532</sup> Quoted in Massignon, p. 507.

<sup>533</sup> Massignon, p. 508. It is worth noting that Sufis maintained different perspectives about al-Hallaj. Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi said: "Some of the important figures spoke of him without naming him." Al-Qushayri would not mention him directly, even if he cited his sayings on fifty different matters and did not write a biography of him, even though he published his creed. Al-Tusi was the least distant from al-Hallaj in his writings: he would mention al-Hallaj by name, but always followed by asking for God's mercy for him. Al-Hallaj gradually became a legend in Persian and popular Sufism, and tributes were made to him by al-'Attar and others.

he was not executed because of his ecstatic utterances or heretical views. Since the days of the Umayyads, this kind of accusation was simply used as a justification for punishing political opponents and those who challenged authority.<sup>534</sup> One chapter of al-Hallaj's story in particular demonstrates the political nature of the ruling against him, starting with the effort to condemn him for something the judge Abu 'Umar al-Maliki had said to insult him: "Oh you who can be killed with impunity (*halal al-damm*)!" The vengeful minister Hamid ibn al-'Abbas grabbed hold of this line and made it the legal ruling in the case. The judge Abu Ayyash also told the caliph that if al-Hallaj remained free, it would lead to "the downfall of the sultan."<sup>535</sup> Al-Hallaj wrote political treatises that have not reached us: *Kitab al-Sasa wa-l-Khulafa' wa-l-Umara'*, *Al-Siyasa ila al-Husayn ibn Hamdan*, and *Al-Dura: Ila Nasr al-Qashuri Hajib al-Maqdar* and the book *Kayd al-Shaytan wa-Amr al-Sultan*.<sup>536</sup>

Al-Hallaj lived during a politically tumultuous period, during which the Abbasid state had become excessively opulent, ruthless, and weak (due to the effect of the despotic Turks and their ability to manipulate the caliphs and remove whomever they chose). During al-Hallaj's life, there were ten different caliphs in power. The last of these was al-Muqtadir, who became caliph at the age of 13. He was subject to the whims of his ministers and the directives of his mother, and violently suppressed any of the qad is who opposed his rule. The court (*hashiya*) had chosen al-Muqtadir to rule because of his weakness and how easily he was manipulated. Thus, the caliph was no longer a functional authority administering the affairs of the state,<sup>537</sup> which reflected the extent of corruption and luxury in palace life, and the preeminence of the military in the politics of the Abbasids at that time. According to the statistics provided by Massignon, drawing on what the minister 'Ali ibn 'Isa recorded, state expenditures for the

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<sup>534</sup> 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri, *Al-'Asr al-'Abbasiyy al-Awal: Dirasa fi al-Tarikh al-Siyasiyy wa-l-Idariyy wa-l-Maliyy*, Beirut: Dar al-Tali'a, third edition, 1997, p. 91.

<sup>535</sup> Massignon, p. 464.

<sup>536</sup> Ibn al-Nadim, *al-Fihrist*, edited by Reza Tajaddod, p. 242-243.

<sup>537</sup> 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Duri, *Dirasat fi al-'Usur al-'Abasiyya al-Mutakhirra*, Beirut: Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-'Arabiyya, second edition, 2011, p. 146.

years 303 and 304 AH(915 to 917 AD) were divided as follows: the army (76 percent), the palace (16 percent), administration and ministries (3.3 percent), the police (1.6 percent), pensions and charitable gifts (*sadaqat*) (2.1 percent).<sup>538</sup> Undoubtedly this situation caused widespread discontent, as was demonstrated by the unrest in Baghdad during that time: there were eighteen uprisings between 308 and 320 AH(920 to 932 AD) protesting the rising price of bread. It is therefore not surprising that under such circumstances, al-Hallaj and others would have pushed for reform and perhaps even harbored revolutionary ambitions. This interpretation of al-Hallaj's life is supported by four points that differentiate al-Hallaj from other Sufis of his day:

1) His frequent travels. Al-Hallaj traveled as far as India, Khorasan, Fars and Khuzestan, Masin-Turfan, Turkestan, the Hijaz and Bahrain. In every land his followers would call him by a different name.<sup>539</sup> Were these trips he made only to preach, or did these names suggest that al-Hallaj was trying to organize a movement?

2) Al-Hallaj was connected to religious and political opposition movements. There is no doubt that he was a Sunni, according to the creed that he wrote out during his trial.<sup>540</sup> Additionally, the shaykhs he studied with were Sunni (Sahl al-Tustari and 'Amr ibn 'Uthman al-Makki). He also rejected Shi'ism (and they did not consider him to be Shi'i), and it was the Shi'i scribes in the palace who ordered his execution. However, unlike other Sufis, he was connected with different political and religious movements, including Shi'ism and the Qarmatians. Was al-Hallaj calling for some kind of cooperation with the Qarmatians in particular, who were still strong at that time? Was the order in 298/911 to prosecute him connected to the emergence of the Fatimid state? Ibn al-Nadim wrote a biography of al-Hallaj among the Isma'ilis and described him as "bold towards the sultans, a perpetrator of monstrosities, and aspiring to topple states."<sup>541</sup> State histo-

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<sup>538</sup> Massignon, p. 355.

<sup>539</sup> Narrative of Baba Kuhi about his son Hamad in Massignon, *Alam al-Hallaj*, p. 56.

<sup>540</sup> Massignon, p. 441.

<sup>541</sup> Ibn al-Nadim, p. 241.



rians, such as al-Tanukhi and al-Suli, also accused him of such ambitions.

3) He was connected to the common people. It is true that Sufism was both a refuge for the people, and a champion for them, but Sufi educational practices and their study circles also continued to have a secret nature. The changes that Sufis were hoping for in society were gradual changes that depended upon the *tazkiya* (purification) of the whole and the individuals within it. As for al-Hallaj, when he returned from his third pilgrimage in 291/904, he began preaching to the people in the markets and the mosques, and large numbers of people gathered to him in Baghdad and other cities. They believed he had *walaya* (sainthood) when he demonstrated his *karamat* (miracles), which his detractors claimed were just magic tricks. He had a significant following in society, which frightened his murderers, who were afraid of an uprising after his death.

4) His influence in the palace: Al-Hallaj achieved popularity and influence outside Sufi circles, since he had reached out to people from all social classes, as his son recounted.<sup>542</sup> Some of those who worked in the palace, such as scribes and court officials, had also become close to him, though his influence reached all the way to the caliph al-Muqtadir and his mother Shaghab. Was this Sufi—an ascetic in principle—hoping to convince the caliph and the court to change, and did people in these circles believe he was a saint and a *qutb*?

There are many different potential interpretations of al-Hallaj's story. Massignon, in *La passion de Hallaj*, for example, writes that he called for a nonpolitical spiritual revolution, but that he was a victim of rivalries between political factions over the viziership. The vizier Hamid ibn al-'Abbas wanted him executed in order to weaken those who supported him, such as the al-Qanna'i scribes and the vizier 'Ali ibn 'Isa. Massignon goes through other matters<sup>543</sup> until linking him with the unsuccessful revolution of Ibn Mu'tazz. For his part, al-

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<sup>542</sup> Massignon, p. 56.

<sup>543</sup> Louis Massignon, *Dirasa 'an al-Munhani al-Shakhsiyy li-Hiya' al-Hallaj: al-Shahid al-Sufiyy fi al-Islam*, in 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi, *Shakhsiyat Qaliqa fi al-Islam*, Cairo: Dar al-Nahda, 1964, second edition, p. 71; *Alam al-Hallaj*, part one, p. 398.

'Alawi saw al-Hallaj as an communalist revolutionary with Qarmatian leanings.<sup>544</sup> Still others saw him as leading a political movement that aimed to take down the Abbasids using slogans calling for "the family of 'Ali" while in reality only trying to install himself.<sup>545</sup>

Al-Hallaj was not the first to create this kind of turmoil within Sufism. Forty-seven years before he was crucified, the Sufis of Iraq experienced a major upheaval after the preacher (*wa'iz*) and Shaykh Ghalib al-Bahlili (popularly known as Ghulam Khalil) (d. 275/888) incited the caliph al-Muwaffaq to arrest seventy Sufis (including al-Junayd as well as Abu al-Husain al-Nuri, (d. 295/907). They were sentenced to death on charges of heresy (*zandaqa*), specifically for what they had said about divine love (*mahabba*). The ordeal passed without further event and the Sufis were released after they convinced the caliph of their innocence. However, the specter of this ordeal remained among the Sufis: this contributed to their working underground and becoming less open about their beliefs. Some felt that al-Hallaj had betrayed these implicit rules, by openly speaking of his Sufism and exposing them to the wrath of the caliph and the slander of the jurists. The execution of al-Hallaj was a visible manifestation of the otherwise hidden tensions between the Sufis and political authorities (as well as some of the jurists).

Regardless of which interpretation is correct, the execution of al-Hallaj left a lasting effect on the path of political Sufism that came after. Sufis saw a greater need to maintain secrecy and to develop certain linguistic symbolism in their theoretical school. Their reformist ambitions and aspirations for change were curtailed, and they increasingly felt the necessity to form connections with the state, as a result of many internal and external factors that crystallized in the sixth century AH. The external factors were connected to (1) the transformation of the political system and the weakness of the centralized bureaucracy, and the emergence of what which Marshall

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<sup>544</sup> Hadi al-'Alawi, p. 218-226.

<sup>545</sup> 'Abd al-Quddus al-Hashimi, *Assasa tanziman sirriyyan li-isqat al-'abasiyyin, fa-Sallabuhu thalath marat wa-qata'uhuwa-ahraquhu .. al-Hallaj Sufi tha'ir am zandiq mariq?*, Aljazeera, Jan 14 2020.

Hodgson called the “*a’yan-amir*” system” of the ascendant military elite (*amirs*) and urban notables (*a’yan*). This system established a balance between social authorities and the authority of the state, and distributed the responsibility for preserving the social structure between the two. (2) The second external factor was the revival of the Sunni *madhhab* by the Seljuqs in the face of the Buyids, Fatimids and Batiniyya movements, which resulted in efforts to include Sufis in this Sunni framework (*ahl al-sunna*).

As for the internal factors, they were (1) the development of Sufi institutions and the growth of the orders, which acquired *zawiyas* (Sufi lodges) and *awqaf* (endowments) and other lands managed by the shaykhs of the orders, some of which were patronized by the state. Additionally, the individual became more free and active outside the institutions that tried to maintain their own interests and possessions. (2) The second factor was the spread of Sufism to the east and the west beyond the area it was originally concentrated in, allowing it to take on a local character and become integrated with local traditions. (3) A third and final factor was the establishment of what constituted Sufi tradition, and the inclusion of Sufis among the accepted masters of philosophy and literature.

The gradually increasing proximity of the Sufis and the state eventually culminated in a close alliance between the two. This was particularly apparent in the major empires of the fifteenth century AD, such as the Ottomans, Safavids, and Timurids (although this alliance was not absolute, as some major orders did retain an oppositional character).<sup>546</sup> However, this did not mean the end of tribulations for the Sufis, or of the Sufi tradition of political opposition and disengagement. Even as Sufism transformed into a social movement,

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<sup>546</sup> For example, we can compare the Chisti order, which chose to remain separate from the rulers of India but were tolerant of Hinduism, and the Naqshbandi order in Central Asia that formed deep connection with the rulers and focused on jihad. There was also the case of the Bektashi order that Ottoman janissaries joined. These differences between the orders can be understood through their different stages of struggle against colonizers (in the case of the Senusiyya, Qadiyya, and other orders) or with the colonizers, such as the Tijaniyya order.

it retained its original focus as an individual path that resisted confinement within structures and frameworks. Neither was al-Hallaj the last Sufi martyr: ‘Ayn al-Quzat Hamadani (d. 525/1131) was crucified, Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi (d. 586/1191) was imprisoned, and Imadaddin Nasimi (d. 820/1417) was skinned alive. The spectacle of these deaths aimed to establish awe of the state in the minds of the people, and to enact the state’s revenge on the bodies of the tortured. This is something that Michel Foucault has discussed in the context of torture as a public spectacle, which paradoxically produces feelings of both “pity and admiration” in those watching.<sup>547</sup> This hidden admiration is magnified if the victim faces his torture and death with courage and conviction. In this way, persecuted Sufis were transformed from heretics in the eyes of the jurists to legendary heroes in the eyes of the people, who sang about Sufis in their poetry, thus preserving the echoes of the long struggle between the crown of *‘irfan* (mysticism) and the crown of the sultan.

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<sup>547</sup> Michel Foucault, *al-Muraqaba wa al-Mu‘aqaba: Wiladat al-Sujun* (Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison), trans. ‘Ali Muqallid, Beirut: Markaz al-Inma’ al-Qawmi, 1990, p. 52.



# ISLAMIC SUFISM: BETWEEN SPIRITUAL MANIFESTATION AND POLITICAL PERFORMANCE

*Hassan Abu Hanieh*

## **Introduction**

Islamic Mysticism possesses an outstanding discursive and interpretative capacity, numerous concrete achievements and broad theoretical potential. Sufism occurs in a context of spiritual experimentation and transformative individual subjective experience. But it also fits into a context of social movements subject to the dynamics of social transformation. Sufism is a complex historical religious phenomenon of social and individual dimensions, and so naturally its structure, composition, and practice comprise numerous schools of thought and approaches to theory and practice. Sufism is best known in modern times for its personal spiritual dimensions and manifestations. However, in its ideological formations and its historical achievements, its social and material dimensions cannot be ignored, and its practices have been indelibly marked by the world of politics.

In this paper, we will examine Sufism both as religious theory and ideology and as historical practice. We will attempt to dispel a number of myths about Sufism, foremost of which is the belief, perpetrated by liberal dogma, that Sufism is only a revolutionary, spiritual, and individualist phenomenon that has neither grounding in material social reality nor connection to political praxis. We will then turn to the myth of a return of Sufism, which assumes a prior absence and is in keeping with the extreme, positivist assumptions of modernity and the demise of religion inherent to modernization theory and classical sociology. These myths have circulated axiomatically for decades without examination, and their sources, intents, and purposes are evident.

## 1. The Nature of Islamic Mysticism’s “Spiritual Manifestation” and its Ideological and Political Dimensions

The reductive notion of Sufism’s confinement to the spiritual sphere has proliferated among modern and contemporary authors. Sufism has become known for its individual and spiritual dimensions and manifestations, and spirituality held up to be its greatest fundamental virtue.<sup>548</sup> The notion that Sufism is limited to the spiritual sphere falls squarely in the category of culturalist myths perpetuated by Protestant Orientalism and modern liberal secularism. Such theories are steeped in a markedly secular definition of religion that sees it as an individual phenomenon that arises from a symbolic bond with superior forces, and a distorted belief about the true nature of the world and human power. Approaches and theories vary in the path they take toward a unified model of interpretation for the phenomenon of religion, on the basis of whether they approach religion as a culture, an identity, a bond, a practice, or an authority.<sup>549</sup> Talal Asad demonstrated that the concept of religion as belief is itself part of the normative secular framework, in which there is no use for the intrinsic materiality of religion.<sup>550</sup> According to José Casanova, secularization theory dominated through the beginning of the 1960s, and remained throughout a suitable lens through which to read the various religious transformations that the world witnessed. At that point,

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<sup>548</sup> Islamic mysticism became known as a spiritual revolution among most Orientalists: Giuseppe Scattolin titled his book *al-Tajalliyat al-Ruhiyya fi al-Islam* (“Spiritual Manifestations in Islam”) while Eric Yunus Geoffroy penned *al-Mustaqbal li-l-Islam al-Ruhaniyy* (original title: *L’islam sera spirituel ou ne sera plus*, “Islam will be spiritual or will be no more”). Some contemporary Arab authors were influenced by this trend, including Muhammad Mustafa Hilmi, who wrote a book entitled *al-Hayat al-Ruhiyya fi al-Islam* (“Spiritual Life in Islam”), as well as Abu al-‘Ala’ ‘Afifi, author of *al-Tasawwuf, al-Thawra al-Ruhiyya fi al-Islam* (“Sufism: the Spiritual Revolution in Islam”).

<sup>549</sup> For more detail on the different meanings ascribed to religion, see: Linda Woodhead, “Khamsat Mafahim li-l-Din,” trans. Tariq ‘Uthman, Nohoudh Center for Studies and Publications, 2019, accessible via link: <https://nohoudh-center.com/%D8%AE%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%A9->

<sup>550</sup> See: Saba Mahmood, *al-Ikhtilaf al-Diniyy, fi ‘Asr ‘Ilmaniyy: Taqrir Hawla al-Aqaliyya*, trans. Karim Muhammad, Markaz Nama’ li-l-Buhuth wa-l-Dirasat, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2018, p. 58.

the first cracks in the theory began to appear and, for the first time, it became possible to separate secularization theory from its ideological roots in the Enlightenment critique of religion. This allowed a distinction between, on the one hand, secularization theory as an autonomous theory of modern differentiation between the religious and temporal spheres and, on the other, the view that this process of modern differentiation will inevitably lead to the gradual erosion of religion, its subsequent decline, and its eventual demise.<sup>551</sup>

The myth that reduces Sufism to individualism and spirituality results from the critique of religion as a category. Spirituality becomes incompatible with religion, which is considered to be private and personal and focused on feeling and experience rather than engagement in a particular doctrine. The theorization of spirituality has largely leaned on a secular discourse, to the extent of celebrating the political and intellectual tradition of secularism.<sup>552</sup> Despite the similarity between the concept of spirituality in the Sufi Islamic conception and that of other religions, there are nevertheless clear differences, though they become contradictory with the liberal secular conception of spirituality. On one hand, we discover that the ideas of Shaykh Muhyi al-Din ibn 'Arabi and his quest for truth have an intellectual affinity with the French philosopher Michel Foucault, for whom spirituality means "a set of exercises and experiments that must be conducted on the subject in order to reach Truth."<sup>553</sup> Spirituality according to Foucault presupposes that "the subject transform, change, move, become, and, in some cases and to a certain degree, become something other than itself or its essence, that is, that the subject becomes something different from itself in order to gain

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<sup>551</sup> See: José Casanova, *al-Adyan al-'Ammā fi al-'Alam al-Hadith*, trans. University of Balam and Department of Languages and Translation, Arab Organization for Translation, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2005, pp. 32-34.

<sup>552</sup> See: Kerry Mitchell, "Siyasat al-Ruhaniyya: Labralat Ta'rif al-Din," in Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair, *al-'Ilmaniyya wa Sina'at al-Din*, trans. Hassan Ahjij, al-Shabaka al-'Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2017, pp. 192-193.

<sup>553</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *al-Inhimam bi-l-Dhat, Jamaliyyat al-Wujud wa-Jara'at Qawl al-Haqiqa*, intr. and trans. Muhammad Azwita, Ifriqiyya al-Sharq, Morocco, 2015, p.7.



access to Truth.”<sup>554</sup> It is the quest, practice, and experience through which the subject operates on itself a set of necessary transformations to arrive at Truth.

Spirituality, then, is a collection of quests, practices, and experiences that can take the shape of cleansing, asceticism, seclusive worship, piety, or repentance, and which constitute for the subject and its being, not knowledge itself, but the price that can ultimately lead one to Truth.<sup>555</sup> Foucault calls the self’s potential for true knowledge “philosophy,” or reflection on that which permits the subject to attain Truth, and he terms “spirituality” the transformations and practices that the subject operates in order to gain access to the essence of Truth. This idea of spirituality, if compared with Islamic mysticism, seems familiar and intimately related to Sufi symbolism. To the Sufi, Truth is nothing but a transcendental revelation, or knowledge of a metaphysical mystery that is achieved only by subjecting oneself to spiritual expurgation and rigorous transformations at the existential level of the self or the soul.<sup>556</sup> This conception manifests itself in the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi: In her book *Ibn ‘Arabi, ou la quête du soufre rouge*, Claude Addas writes that “*fath*, which is etymologically indicative of openness, is employed in Sufi terminology to refer to spiritual burgeoning, the illumination that is evidence of attaining an elevated station along one’s spiritual journey and usually occurs only after a long period of spiritual exercise.” According to Ibn ‘Arabi, spiritual exercise “means moral discipline, abandoning frivolity, bearing pain” and, accordingly, struggling against the self (*muja-hada*) in solitude or even in genuine isolation, to think freely, away from all that stands in the way of reflection or the self.<sup>557</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *Ta’wil al-Dhat, Durus Ulqiyat fi al-Kulij du Frans la-Sanat 1981-1982*, trans. al-Zawawi Baghura, Dar al-Tali’a li-l-Taba’a wa-l-Nashr, Beirut, 2001, pp. 24-25.

<sup>555</sup> See: Michel Foucault, *al-Inhimam bi-l-Dhat, Jamaliyat al-Wujud wa-Jara’at Qawl al-Haqiqa*, p. 13.

<sup>556</sup> See: “Al-Safar al-Ruhiyy ila al-Haqiqa,” al-Ittihad, “al-Mulhaq al-Thaqafiyy” section, 14 February 2018, accessible via: <https://bit.ly/3mjjeYU>

<sup>557</sup> See: Claude Addas, *Ibn ‘Arabi Siratuh wa-Fikruh*, trans. Ahmad al-Sadiqi, Dar al-Madar al-Islamiyy, Beirut, 2014, pp. 71-76.

Despite the apparent similarity between the spirituality of Islamic mysticism and the concept of spirituality as defined by Foucault with regard to the self, truth, and freedom, one must be cautious of a liberal interpretation of freedom. The Sufi seeks freedom from everything, from all that is “other” and “not,” in order to arrive at God Almighty.<sup>558</sup> The discursive convergence over the term freedom does not indicate compatibility of its liberal and Sufi conceptions; the spiritual station of freedom is a *sui generis*, not a borrowed, principle of the Sufi spiritual path.<sup>559</sup> The early Sufis did not seek absolute freedom, nor did they seek freedom alone and for its own sake. Rather, freedom for them was the flip side of true devotion, such that freedom is a negative value whereas devotion is the positive value.<sup>560</sup>

In revealing the ideological and political dimensions of spiritual Sufism, Rosemary Hicks breaks down the complex ties between Cold War politics and the structure of the academy as they reveal themselves in North American perceptions of Islamic mysticism. These perceptions are the historical product of intellectual and political networks whose work centers on a conception of Islamic mysticism that is rooted in overtly Protestant-inflected notions of rationality, freedom, and individual faith, all within a framework of political projects of religion-making that seek to fashion an Islamic faith that

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<sup>558</sup> In fact, some Sufi discursive escapades would suggest at face value the desire to be freed even from God. Refer to al-Hallaj’s saying, “Oh People, help me from God...” in Ali ibn Anjab al-Sa’i, *Akhbar Hallaj*, ed. Muwaffaq Fawzi al-Jabr, Dar al-Tali’a, Beirut, pt. 2, 1997, pp. 70-71; And the saying of Abu Talib al-Makki, who was publicly ostracized, “There is no greater harm to creation than the Creator.” See: Ibn Al-Jawzi, *Talbis Iblis*, ed. Ayman Salih Sha’ban, Dar al-Hadith, Cairo, 2003 p.171.

<sup>559</sup> Note that al-Qushayri dedicated a section in his epistle to “freedom.” See: Abu al-Qasim al-Qushayri, *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya*, ed. ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud ibn al-Sharif, Dar al-Sha’b, Cairo, 1989, p.378.

<sup>560</sup> Abu Nasr al-Sarraj al-Tusi said in a passage on the mistaken origins of Sufism, “the errant group thought that the name of freedom was more perfect than the name of devotion... What they could not see is that the devotee is not truly devoted until his heart is free from all but God Almighty, and only at that point is he truly a follower of God (*abdan li-llah*).” See: al-Sarraj al-Tusi, *al-Luma’*, ed. ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud and Taha ‘Abd al-Baqi Surur, Dar al-Kutub al-Haditha, Egypt, 1960, p.531.

agrees with Western-American interests.<sup>561</sup> According to Hicks, “the mental gymnastics in creating rational, reformed mysticism in modernist terms are necessary only within the modernist, Protestant, Orientalist logic from which tropes of individualist, ‘otherworldly’ mysticism derived.” She further suggests that “scholars might also investigate dramatized narratives about liberalisms and mysticisms. While some contemporary academics argue that the category of mysticism has been dismantled in the academy, others echo twentieth-century philosophers who feared that mysticism can cause an illiberal and anti-ethical slide toward fascism.”<sup>562</sup>

The myth of mysticism’s spirituality and individualism began dissipating in recent studies. According to Nile Green, in the eyes of European and American researchers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of “Sufism” was based on a conception of religion that was intellectually universal, symbolically modernist, and culturally Protestant. The authority of direct experience, in which there is no intermediary for isolated individuals, was considered to be the source of true religiosity in all cultures and time periods. In a similarly Protestant fashion, “religion” itself was considered a suitably separate category (or a preferred category at any rate) from the corrupt world of politics. When these two paradigms were applied to the study of Islam, model Sufis, in the eyes of many scholars, were the complete opposite of institutional, shari’a-bound Islam, regardless of whether they lived in quiet isolation far from worldly affairs or were leading revolutions that culminated in zealous martyrdom. But contrary to the Western notion of mysticism, many facets of Sufism were collective and public facets, not simply individual and private.<sup>563</sup>

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<sup>561</sup> See: Rosemary Hicks, “al-Din al-Muqaran wa-Ta’thir al-Harb al-Barida fi Tahawwul al-Tasawwuf al-Hindi-al-Farisi ila Hadatha Islamiyya Libraliyya, in Markus Dressler and Arvind Mandair, *al-Ilmaniyya wa Sina’at al-Din*, trans. Hassan Ahjij, al-Shabaka al-‘Arabiyya li-l-Abhath wa-l-Nashr, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2017, pp.215-261.

<sup>562</sup> See: Ibid, p.260.

<sup>563</sup> See: Nile Green, *al-Sufiyya: Nasha’tuha wa-Tarikhuha*, trans. Safiyya Mukhtar, Mu’assasat Hindawi, United Kingdom, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2017, p.24.

Common modern fallacies derived from purely individualist conceptions of spirituality have produced a myth of the separation between the spiritual, material, and political. This is in addition to the claim that Sufism is founded on a renunciation of reason and a withdrawal from the world, considering it to be epistemologically related to the principles of “*irfan*.”<sup>564</sup> The Moroccan philosopher Taha Abderrahmane has exposed the incoherence of this myth, which relies on a fragmentary, taxonomic approach to Arab-Islamic intellectual heritage (*turath*) popularized by the Moroccan thinker Mohammed Abed al-Jabri. Abderrahmane employs a rational approach founded on an inclusive vision of heritage to counter Al-Jabri’s fragmentary view, in which concepts drawn from the Western discursive field are projected without regard for the requirements of the Arab-Islamic discursive field, which include faith, language, and knowledge. Al-Jabri’s fragmentary view is based on the division of Arab heritage in three specialized systems of knowledge: “*burhan*” (evidence and demonstration; deductive reasoning), “*bayan*” (indication; the science of rhetoric and religious interpretation), and “*irfan*” (illumination; the transcendental cognition of mysticism), as if these systems were distinct islands of knowledge, and without regard for the deliberative, overlapping, intersecting factors of Islamic heritage. If we consider the most renowned representatives of Arab Islamic culture, we find that their defining theoretical and practical achievements overlap without contradiction. Hardly any of the oeuvres of Islam’s scholars – irrespective of their philosophical, theological, foundational, or jurisprudential involvements – is devoid of a mystic *irfani* element, from Ibn Sina and al-Shatibi, to Ibn Khaldun and even Ibn Taymiyya, to name just a few.

Al-Jabri’s three-way division of traditional Arab-Islamic knowledge systems stumbles into a logical fallacy according to Taha Abderrahmane, namely, the “fallacy of double standards.” This fallacy manifests itself in the use of conflicting criteria in the structure of this division and its related taxonomies. That is, each of the three system belongs to a different discursive framework, such that “*burhan*”

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<sup>564</sup> See: Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri, *Bunyat al-‘Aql al-‘Arabi*, Markaz Dirasat al-Wahda al-‘Arabiyya, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1986.

is a category related to rational inferential form, while “*bayan*” is a category related to verbal expression, and “*irfan*” is a category related to gnostic content.<sup>565</sup>

The fragmentary view of Islamic intellectual heritage generally and Sufi heritage in particular has made Sufism vulnerable to criticism and distortion. In the context of the debate around the relation between heritage and modernity, Sufism has come under sweeping attack from various representatives of modern and contemporary Arab culture: the shaykh, the liberal, and the herald of technocracy, according to Abdallah Laroui in his book *Contemporary Arab Ideology*. Laroui defines the Western historical path as the only way to reach a modernity that was inaugurated by the European Age of Enlightenment.<sup>566</sup> Concepts such as “reason” and “rationality,” “science,” “scientism,” “secularism,” “light,” and “obscurity” have thus come to dominate in the study of Sufism, which is in turn equated to “superstition,” “magic,” and “obscurantism.” The representatives of Arab culture have conceded the imperative of abandoning the traditions of a spellbound world in a march toward the horizon of modernity and rationalization posited by Max Weber, without so much as considering the literatures that cast Enlightenment as myth, such as the works of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

There is no question that the pointed critiques of Sufism as a superstitious, hermetical structure resistant to science and reality are rooted in a certain perception of “modern reason,” a peculiar perception that is based in abstraction. Taha Abderrahmane revealed the restrictive nature of this abstract reasoning in the context of his critique of the techno-scientific regime of modernity and globalization. The rationality touted by the propagandists of modernity is none other than this “abstract reason,” which is a positivist and historical reasoning in which there is certainty of neither benefit nor

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<sup>565</sup> See: Taha ‘Abd al-Rahman, *Tajdid al-Manhaj fi Taqwim al-Turath*, al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-‘Arabiyy, Casablanca, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1994, p. 55.

<sup>566</sup> See: ‘Abdallah Al-‘Arwi, *al-Idyulujiya al-‘Arabiyya al-Mu‘asira*, al-Markaz al-Thaqafiyy al-‘Arabiyy, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2006.

harm, and with which there is no right nor wrong. Taha Abderrahmane expands the notion of reason, which modernity has limited to “abstract” reason, to include “guided” reason and “supported” reason, reason as action rather than essence. Abderrahmane worked to deconstruct the dichotomy of Shari’a versus Truth, which is the basis on which Sufism historically differed with Islamic jurisprudence. Indeed, the jurists adopted of a model of inference in making, applying, and following legal rulings that does not go beyond the manifest meaning of Islamic sources (*zahir*), whereas Sufism charted a path based on the quest for hidden meaning (*batin*), all while maintaining the *zahir*.<sup>567</sup>

Under the dominance of enlightenment myths and the spread of an extreme, positivist scientism bent on fragmenting and compartmentalizing everything from fields of knowledge to human beings and their motives and drivers, Sufism has been subject to an unparalleled process of systematized destruction by the representatives of contemporary Arab culture. They have imputed to Sufism the causes of the *umma*’s backwardness, underdevelopment, and inward retreat, as well as the defeat it suffered at the hands of European colonial campaigns. Such a position was reinforced by Sufism’s entrance into a phase of inertia and absence of renewal and the cooperation of some Sufi orders with colonial administrations, in spite of the fact that it was Sufi orders who also represented the primary lever in the resistance to colonialism. The entrenchment of these clichéd stereotypes mired in ignorance and myth was aided by Sufism’s transition into a phase of rigidity over customs, rituals, and the veneration of saints in a context of social transformation. Thus various factions and adversaries colluded – liberals, nationalists, and Salafists, and later leftists – to sound the death knell of Sufism and tear down its fantastical stature, under the pretext of rescuing reason and reviving rationality, all without scrutiny for the nature of reason and rationality. The Salafist shaykh viewed Sufism as an imported, destructive in-

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<sup>567</sup> See: Taha ‘Abd al-Rahman, *al-‘Amal al-Diniyy wa-Tajdid al-‘Aql*, al-Markaz al-Thaqafiy al-‘Arabiyy, Beirut, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1997.

stitution wishing to spread heresy, superstition, idolatry, and apostasy so as to undermine Islam and the Islamic world from within, a view corroborated by liberals and the advocates of technocracy. Thus Sufism became equivalent to “*irfan*” and “Gnosticism” and resignation and withdrawal from the world, a view that is conspicuously enveloped in a modernist and Orientalist reading of religion generally, of Islam in particular, and of Sufism even more specifically. It is a view that has reinterpreted and recast Islamic mysticism as the anti-thesis of modernity and the West, on the basis of a flimsy myth that considers it to be an individual spiritual phenomenon devoid of material, social, and political dimensions.

## 2. The Material and Social Dimension of Islamic Mysticism

The material and social dimensions of Sufism are no less apparent than its spiritual manifestations – assuming that it is possible to separate between the spiritual and the material and transcend practical limits, since human beings are both body and soul. Islamic mysticism quickly evolved from an individual practice into a dynamic social phenomenon established through a complex hierarchical organizational structure of orders, *zawaya* (sing. *zawiya*, Sufi lodge), and *ribatat* (sing. *ribat*, fortified Sufi hospice or retreat). As a movement, Sufism participated in the most material of manifestations in the world, in the form of outward “jihad,” as well as inward “*ih̄tisab*” (performing good deeds with hope of God’s reward). That is to say, Sufism is the product of Islam itself. Indeed, the religious factor was pivotal in the emergence of Islamic mysticism: Sufism is based in the original Islamic sources of the Qur’an and the Sunna and its first nucleus emerged in the pious ascetic current among the companions of the Prophet. Still, the circumstances of Sufism’s emergence were bolstered by a number of political, social, and cultural factors. The difficult circumstances of early Islam – political chaos, power struggles, strife, and internal wars – worked to spread a state of spiritual anxiety, a sense of social injustice, and grievances about growing class disparity between the haves and have-nots that led to the growth of a trend of ascetism. According to Nicholson, the factors be-

hind the emergence of Sufism were varied, but the suffering of Muslims at the hands of oppressive and tyrannical rulers incited a tendency toward asceticism as a means of protest and spiritual revolution against authority.<sup>568</sup> Thus the fledgling Sufi movement took on a moral, pious, and ascetic path that quickly gave way to various schools of thought, currents, and social movements.

The current of morality, piety, and asceticism was heavily shaped by the socio-political element in Islam. It was an individual choice for self-betterment that precluded social reform within a society burdened by the injustice of the ruling authorities, and the expression of a return to superior Islamic values. Asceticism was the necessary precursor to a Sufism characterized by isolation, severing human relations, and shunning worldliness out of concern for God and the afterlife. An ascetic class thus emerged in Muslim society, the ranks of which multiplied over time and became an organized current in Basra, Kufa, Damascus, and Nishapur.<sup>569</sup>

Sufism represents an important historical phenomenon extending throughout Islamic history, first appearing as a spiritual movement from the first century AH with the first pietists and ascetics such as al-Hassan al-Basri (d. 110 AH / 728 AD). It then grew and developed in the second and third centuries AH with the immersive experiences of divine love of figures such as Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya al-Basriyya (d. 185 AH / 801 AD), as well as the development of the notions of *fana'* (annihilation of the self) and *baqa'* (abiding in God) by al-Junayd (d. 298 AH / 910 AD) among others. Sufism then eventually led to the tragedy of al-Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 309 AH / 922 AD) which exemplifies the tension and clash in Islamic history between the mendicant movement (the Sufis) and the jurisprudential world (the theologians). Sufism then parted into two paths, the first of which was known as Sunni Sufism and emerged in the fourth and

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<sup>568</sup> See: Reynold Nicholson, *Fi al-Tasawwuf al-Islamiyy wa-Tarikhuh*, trans. Abu al-'Ala 'Afifi, Cairo, 1956, p.46.

<sup>569</sup> See: Hassan Abu Haniyya, *al-Turuq al-Sufiyya, Durub Allah al-Ruhiyya, al-Takayyuf wa-l-Tajdid fi Sinq al-Tahdith*, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Amman, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2011, p.57.



fifth centuries AH and beyond. Its followers, including Imam Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali (d. 505 AH / 1111 AD) and others, worked hard to find a persuasive common ground between inner mystical experience and manifest Islamic law.<sup>570</sup> This first current produced renowned masterpieces of Sufi literature, such as Imam Abu al-Qasim ‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri’s (d. 465 AH / 1072 AD) *Risala Qushayriyya* and Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazali *Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din*, which represents the pinnacle of Sunni Sufism.

The second, meanwhile, is a philosophical current that applied itself to more theoretical subjects, carried by the followers of the school of “*wahdat al-wujud*” (Unity of Being) in the sixth and seventh centuries AH onward, such as Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi (d. 634 AH / 1240 AD) and others. This current worked hard to find a formula that reconciles Sufism with the so-called “*Batin of Islamic Law*,” that is, its profound meaning and its highest purpose; it produced great Sufi works that overflowed with creative, deep, and unique philosophical theories. And from the sixth century AD / twelfth century AD onwards, the Sufi movement has grown and expanded into what is known as the phenomenon of Sufi orders, which have flourished and proliferated throughout the Muslim world to this day.<sup>571</sup>

Through historical transformation, Sufism has seen the rise of numerous paths. The individual nature of Sufism as an elitist personal and spiritual experience seeking to grow nearer to God and sever relationships with others dominated the early stages of its development in the second century AH. It then turned into a social phenomenon from the fifth century AH onwards, followed by a period between the sixth and eleventh centuries AH when Sufism grew in influence and proliferated. Finally, with the turn of the twelfth century AH it transformed into the Sufism of orders, through which it went on to become a popular phenomenon.

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<sup>570</sup> See: Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>571</sup> See: Giuseppe Scattolin and Ahmad Hassan Anwar, *Al-Tajaliyyat al-Ruhiyya fi al-Islam: Nusus Sufiyya ‘abr al-Tarikh*, al-Hay’a al-Misriyya al-‘Amma li-l-Kitab, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 2008, p. 7.

The orders founded *zawaya*, which have been places of comfort and refuge for their followers, as well the nursery of their upbringing and education. The *zawiya* is in essence an educational institution for the discipline and cultivation of mind, soul, and spirit. It delivers social services and humanitarian acts like shelter for the disabled, the widowed, the orphaned, the poor, the needy, foreigners, and travelers in need. In this capacity, Sufi *zawaya* have served as bastions of moral values and guardians of Arab-Islamic national identity during the Ottoman and colonial eras, as bulwarks against cultural and missionary campaigns and incursions.<sup>572</sup> They became a spiritual, economic, and social force to which pilgrims and visitors would gravitate for shelter, and a place to worship, meditate, seek advice, and preach right and wrong (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*).<sup>573</sup>

Islamic mysticism developed over time and gave rise to many formations. According to the Orientalists Gibb and Bowen, Sufi communities manifested in three types: (1) the orders of Sunni Sufis scholars, historically supported by the rulers Nur al-Din and Salah al-Din, (2) coastal and highland jihadi Sufis, who formed *zawaya* and pursued spiritual and military instruction to defend Muslim lands, and (3) spiritual Sufism, rooted in local communities and focused on ethical-communal mysticism and social utility.<sup>574</sup>

If Sufi orders and *zawaya* evince dynamic social activism, the participation of ascetics and Sufis in jihad is nevertheless difficult to account for. Ibn al-Jawzi tells of Sufi imams and leaders who were stationed in cities and frontier outposts, joined the warriors in battle and guarded the mountain passes and the highest castles. Examples include 'Abd Allah ibn al-Mubarak (d. 181 AH / 797 AD), whose military achievements include many postings on the borders and clashes

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<sup>572</sup> 'Abd al-Qadir al-Shati, *Ibid*, p. 310.

<sup>573</sup> Jean Chevalier, *al-Tasawwuf wa-l-Mutasawwifa*, trans. 'Abd al-Qadir Qanini, Dar Ifriqiyya al-Sharq, Beirut, 1996 edition, p. 73.

<sup>574</sup> A. R. Gibb, Hamilton and Bowen, Harold, *Islamic Society and the West: A Study of the Impact of Western Civilization on Moslem Culture in the Near East*, 1957, trans. Ahmad Aybas, republished by Dar al-Kutub al-Wataniyya, UAE, vol. 2, p.264.

with famous enemy warriors, all while composing his *Kitab al-Jihad*, the oldest of many comparable works to follow.<sup>575</sup>

Ibrahim ibn Adham (d. 161 AH / 777 AD) is considered one of the most prominent figures in the development of the concept of “martyrdom” as the best means of shaping Islamic society. In the third century AH, hundreds of Sufi volunteers enlisted in the mobilization for jihad and would urge rulers to carry out preemptive campaigns. They would be stationed in their *zawaya*, caring for the instruction of pupils in the coastal frontier and mountain passes and delivering rhetorical speeches to galvanize Muslim troops against the enemy. Hatim al-Assam (d. 237 AH / 851 AD) died in his *ribat* while defending Muslim lands in a mountain pass, while Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 261 AH / 848 AD) dedicated himself to either a mosque or a *ribat* for over 40 years. Also among those who participated in jihad were Abu Hamza al-Sufi (d. 269 AH / 882 AD) who was praised by his imam al-Junayd for “enlisting in the campaigns in Sufi garb,” as well as Sari al-Saqati (d. 253 AH / 867 AD), to whom most Sufi orders trace their lineage, and his nephew Imam al-Junayd (d. 297 AH / 910 AD), both of whom joined the campaigns and fought to defend Muslim lands.<sup>576</sup>

In this context, the *futuwa* (Islamic knightly fraternity) or military service was a stable instrument for communal protection and jihad against invaders. It was preached and developed as a means of achieving justice, protecting social cohesion, maintaining order, and countering foreign encroachment. The “young men of the frontiers” (*fityan al-thughur*) was a widespread moniker for Sufi orders who stationed in their *zawaya* and homes practicing *dhikr* and jihad, and training the hearts of their students in Greater Jihad as they commended their physical competence.<sup>577</sup>

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<sup>575</sup> See: Jamal al-Din Abu al-Faraj ibn al-Jawzi, *Siffat al-Safwa*, Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabiyy, Beirut, Lebanon, p. 768.

<sup>576</sup> See: As'ad al-Khatib, *al-Butula wa-l-Fida' 'ind al-Sufiyya: Dirasa Tarikhiyya*, Dar al-Taqwa, Damascus, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, p. 63-77.

<sup>577</sup> See: *Ibid*, p. 83.

It is easy to trace the activities of Sufism as a social movement, and Sufi participation in acts of jihad, through all periods of Islamic history, including colonization. Like all social movements, Sufism went through diverse phases and numerous transformations throughout *dar al-Islam*. In the event of an occupation of Islamic countries by external powers, as was the case during the colonial era, the variegation among Sufi orders reached a level of contradiction between those that embraced resistance and jihad and those that chose fealty and subordination to the colonial administration. In Egypt, the Sufi orders were divided on the matter of British colonialism, such that the Ahmadiyya order cooperated while the 'Azmiyya order resisted. In Sudan, the Maghniyya and the Khatmiyya supported the occupation while the Mahdawiyya order espoused resistance and jihad.<sup>578</sup> In Libya, most Sufi orders colluded with the Italian colonial power, with the exception of the Sanusiyya order, which resisted the occupier under the leadership of its shaykh Omar al-Mukhtar. In Algeria, Prince 'Abd al-Qadir, leader of the Qadiriyya order, rose to prominence through his opposition to French colonialism, alongside the Rahmaniyya-Sanusiyya and the Darqawiyya-Tayibiyya orders, while the Tijaniyya order stood by the colonial administration. This scene of conflicting Sufi loyalty and resistance was repeated throughout all Islamic and Arab lands subjected to colonial power.<sup>579</sup>

In his essay entitled "Sufism and Colonialism," Knut S. Vikør argues that Sufis, like all Muslims, had diverse reactions to the arrival of the European forces that took control of Muslim lands. Most orders resorted to the use of force in defense of Islam, or of Ottoman political suzerainty, or of their material, financial, and human resources. Any generalization of Sufism as either compliant or (violently) rebellious, as French sources might describe it, is as utterly misleading as the current conception in Western politics and regional foreign policies of Sufism as categorically non-violent. Vikør examines many ex-

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<sup>578</sup> See: 'Ammar 'Ali Hassan, *Al-Sufiyya wa-l-Siyasa fi Misr*, Markaz al-Mahrusa, Maadi (Cairo), 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1997, p. 97.

<sup>579</sup> See: 'Abd al-Majid 'Antar, *al-Turuq al-Sufiyya wa-l-'Isti'mar*, accessible via: [http://news13dz.blogspot.com/2010/12/blog-post\\_11.html](http://news13dz.blogspot.com/2010/12/blog-post_11.html)

amples of Sufi opposition to colonial authorities. Both the Qadiriyya order's resistance to the French occupation in western and central Algeria between 1832 and 1847, and the political structures they established, were legitimated on the basis of the tribal and spiritual authority of the father of Commander of the Faithful 'Abd al-Qadir, who led jihad in his capacity as "a prince for the faithful."<sup>580</sup>

### 3. The Political Utility of Islamic Mysticism

Historically, Sufism has not been far removed from the game of politics and attempts at its instrumentalization. Since the Cold War era, it has come back forcefully to the political scene through Western liberal capitalist powers' exploitation of the "religious element" in order to confront the Soviet Union and the socialist system. They did so by embracing an Islamic mysticism based on overtly Protestant-inflected notions of rationality, freedom, and individual faith, within the framework of political religion-making projects seeking to fashion an Islamic faith that agrees with Western-American interests. These perspectives were revived after the end of the Cold War ended and the danger was recast in the form of fundamentalist Islamic movements. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States of America, carried out by Al-Qaeda with its violent, radical, jihadist, Salafist ideology, have impacted perceptions on the issues of Islam, politics, moderation, extremism, and terrorism. According to Alix Phillipon, "since the War on Terror was waged, Wahhabism has been branded as ideologically synonymous with hatred and intolerance. Conversely, much effort has gone into promoting Sufism as the moderate alternative, and the effective means of countering terrorism in many Muslim-majority countries and beyond. Sufism has also emerged among American policymaking circles as an ideological shield against extremism and terrorism, as an effective tool of religious soft power."<sup>581</sup>

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<sup>580</sup> Cambridge University Library, Downloaded from <https://www.cambridge.org/core>. Cornell University Library, p.215, accessed from: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms>. Link

<sup>581</sup> See: Alix Phillipon, "Al-Sufiyya ka-Wasila li-l-Harb 'ala al-Irhab: Furas wa-Makhatir," trans. Ahmad Barakat, Aswat Online, accessible via: =

It is indisputable that the quest to integrate Sufism as a moderate force in the face of extremism and terrorism fits within a contemporary framework of political instrumentalization. This position does not pay attention to the historical course of Sufism's composition, organizational structure and ideological formations. According to Alix Philippon, even a quick appraisal of the history of the politicization and the Western perception of Sufis betrays this kind of idealized Sufi solution as misleading. There was a time in the history of Islamic-Western relations when the "Islamic threat" was not associated with jihadist Salafists, the likes of al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden or ISIS leader Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, but rather with Sufi shaykhs who led the resistance movement against Western powers. During the colonial era, Sufism emerged plainly as a blatant threat and sudden danger to the Western imperialist project. The Sufi orders that led the jihad against colonial powers from Algeria to India were a bitter source of paranoia that plagued Western leaders in the colonies.<sup>582</sup>

In this context, we find ourselves confronted yet again with the weaving of new myths about Sufism, which double down on the old myths that reduce Sufism to its spiritual dimension, leaving out the material and political, and claim a return of Sufism as though it had been absent. The "absence" myth conveniently ignores the simple fact of Sufism's centuries-long "presence" as a political and social actor. Sufism has been constantly present since its transformation into an essential component of society, and has contributed abundantly to the religious, educational and social spheres. It came to the defense of religion and the country, and then continued to trouble the central authority within its geographical and political borders. Although all points to a resurgence of Sufism today, the instrumental approach nevertheless remains unable to provide the appropriate theoretical and historical framework for understanding and analyzing its dynamics. It is unreasonable to explain this entire Sufi "movement," in all its various dimensions, as a mere instrumentalization, or rather

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=<http://aswatonline.com/2019/01/31/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%A9->

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

“mobilization,” of Sufism by the state. This is particularly illogical when the same conception of Sufism has framed the issue for many as a “paradoxical return.” We are faced here with a more complex and extensive problem, and perhaps what is at hand is the historical and anthropological relationship between Sufism and society. From a historical standpoint, we find that Sufism as religious system and as a field of social practice, since the fifth century AH / eleventh century AD, has not entirely withdrawn from the spheres of power and influence, whether at the level of religious, social, cultural, or political life. This political presence has occurred and continues to occur, in one form or another, either under sponsorship and intervention from the State (within the framework of a kind of political control and instrumentalization), or independently of the state, or even in conflict and competition with it.<sup>583</sup>

Sufism was a key actor in politics and society for centuries and an integral part of the structure of the Islamic State since the fifth century AH. It was also the sanctioned political ideology of successive Islamic emirates, states, and empires through the Ottoman state, and represented the central force against the colonizing European empires. After the demise of the colonial era and the achievement of independence and the rise of the nation-state in the Arab world, most Arab and Islamic regimes, regardless of their political and cultural systems, sought to assimilate Sufism into their ideological organs, and worked to bolster, support, and institutionalize it. Their goal was to instrumentalize Sufism in opposition to the rise of political Islam and to consolidate their legitimacy.<sup>584</sup> According to French researcher and Sufism specialist Eric Geoffroy, “we find that the Arab regimes worked to integrate Sufism into the government in order to fight the Islamist phenomenon. Hence the Moroccan Minister of Endowments,

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<sup>583</sup> Dr. Muhammad Jahhah, “Al-Tasawwuf wa-As’ilat al-‘Awda: fi Susyulujiya al-Hirak al-Sufiyy bi-l-Maghrib,” Aranthropos.com, accessible via: <https://bit.ly/3mmepVe>

<sup>584</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser worked to coopt Sufism after the revolution of 23 July 1952, in the context of his confrontation with the Muslim Brotherhood; his successors Anwar Sadat and Husni Mubarak followed in his footsteps. For further detail, see: Dr. ‘Ammar ‘Ali Hassan, *Al-Tanshi’a al-Siyasiyya li-l-Turuq al-Sufiyya fi Misr*, Dar al-‘Ayn, Cairo, 1<sup>st</sup> edition 2009, pp. 179-185.

Ahmed Toufiq, is a Sufi, and Shaykh Ahmed el-Tayeb in Egypt, a member of the Khalwati order, became president of Al-Azhar University after serving as Grand Mufti of Egypt, while in Algeria we find that Bouteflika has very close ties to Sufism, which featured prominently in his last campaign.”<sup>585</sup>

Fulya Atacan, who compared the Turkish and Egyptian cases and the relations between Sufi orders and authorities following independence and the formation of nation-states, points out that most Arab countries preferred to include Sufi orders to their new political order. This does not mean that Sufi orders were never in a position of opposition in these countries, and it is in fact difficult to make a generalization about the position of Sufi orders vis-à-vis the state: one can find examples for both cases of opposition and of support. In other words, the political standing of Sufi orders has historically changed according to the social and political circumstances in each country.

Examples of Sufi orders incorporated into politics and the state abound. Sufi orders are banned in Turkey, but many have cultivated protective relations with various parties, including the Republican People's Party, and have adapted to the new multiparty system and became part of the Turkish political class. The National Order Party, the first party established by Necmettin Erbakan and his associates, was in fact founded by one of the Naqshbandi-Khalidi communities, the Gümüşhanevi branch, with the support of the Nur Cemaati. Today, many prominent political figures, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), are members of the Naqshbandi community.

In Egypt, the state has tried to interfere in the activities of Sufi orders ever since the Ottoman era. The Egyptian state established the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders in 1895 for the purpose of monitoring the operations of Sufi orders within the country. Despite the law's revision in 1903, the organizational structure of Sufi orders in Egypt today (based on Law No. 118 of 1976), consists of a 16-member

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<sup>585</sup> French Orientalist, *al-Sufiyya hiyya al-Hall*, via link:  
[http://islamyun.net/index.php?option=com\\_k2&view=item&id=45](http://islamyun.net/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=45)



council, 10 members of which are elected by the 73 recognized Sufi orders for a three-year term. In addition to these ten members, the council includes a representative of the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, a representative of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, a representative of the Ministry of Interior, a representative of the Ministry of Culture, and a representative of general security for local government and popular organizations, all of whom are appointed. The ten shaykhs are elected from among the Sufi formations recognized by Parliament and a grand shaykh is appointed by the President of the Republic. The Supreme Council of Sufi Orders in Egypt is responsible for supervising Sufi practices, recognizing new orders, and issuing resolutions that warn against the practices of any unregistered group or person claiming to be part of the Sufi movement. In fact, there are many branches of Sufi orders that are not officially registered, whose shaykhs do not require recognition from the state in order to exercise their authority.<sup>586</sup>

The relationship between Sufi orders and the regimes of the Arab world and globally reached its apotheosis following the September 11 attacks. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in New York and Washington revealed the entrenchment of an Arab Salafist Jihadist ideology, which led the U.S. administration to adopt its policy of “War on Terror.” In its comprehensive framework, the U.S. espoused a war of ideas based on the cultivation of a “moderate Islam” and it found Sufi orders to be the perfect solution. Research centers and think tanks diligently held conferences and published studies and began networking extensively with Sufi orders in cooperation and coordination with Arab regimes. Thus, in 2003, the neoconservative Nixon Center organized a conference in Washington, D.C. and secured the attendance of one of the world's most prominent Naqshbandi shaykhs, Hisham Qabbani, alongside the renowned Orientalist Bernard Lewis, to promote an official alliance between the U.S. government and “moderate Sufism.” Qabbani has since become a popular figure of modern international Sufism and a regular lecturer and preacher in various countries around the Muslim world – Thail-

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<sup>586</sup> See: Fulya Atacan, *Al-Sufiyya wa-l-Siyasa: Muqarana bayn al-Mujtama'at al-Turkiyya wa-l-'Arabiyya*, Sharq Nama journal, no. 7, January 2011.

and, Indonesia, Malaysia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Spain, and the Levant region. Likewise, Daniel Pipes called on U.S. officials to support moderate Sufism through the Center for Islamic and Democratic Studies.<sup>587</sup>

The first fruits of efforts on the think tank circuit came in the form of a 2003 study by the RAND Corporation entitled “Civil Democratic Islam,” which noted that Sufi communities were one of America’s presumed allies in the Muslim world. In 2007, RAND published a second study entitled “Building Moderate Islamic Networks”, followed by another in 2009 touching on Sufism and entitled “Radical Islam in East Africa.” In 2005, the United States Institute of Peace published a study on “Political Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa” on the issue of Sufism in the region and, in 2007, the Carnegie Endowment published an extended study on “Sufism in Central Asia.” In March 2004, meanwhile, the Nixon Center organized a conference entitled “Understanding Sufism and its Potential Role in U.S. Policy.”<sup>588</sup>

These developments coincided with Sufi activity in most Arab and Muslim countries, within the framework of loyalty and patronage politics and the assimilation of Sufism as a tolerant ideology that could, in the context of a cultural cold war, counter violent extremism and shore up legitimacy for authoritarian regimes.

In Egypt, a number of Sufi shaykhs belong to the National Party and the Grand Mufti and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar are prominent Sufi figures.<sup>589</sup> In Algeria, Sufi orders were granted support by the ruling authorities, and in return Sufism lent its support to the state, chiefly the Qadiriyya order, which became one of the pillars of the regime and contributed to Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s victory in the 1999 and 2004 elections. During this time, one of the most consequential proposals submitted to the government was a call by Dr. Mohamed

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<sup>587</sup> See: Nuran Hassan, “Al-Sufiyya wa-l-Islam al-Siyasiyy: Hal Hiyya Badil Mumkin? (2),” Egyptian Institute for Studies, accessible via: <https://bit.ly/3857ATd>

<sup>588</sup> See: Al-Sayyid Zahra, “Amrika wa-l-Harb ‘ala Jubhat al-Sufiyya,” accessible via: <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/islamyoon/sufi-orders/113281-2010-03-02%2014-44-33.html>

<sup>589</sup> See: Ibrahim ‘Isa, “Sufiyyat al-Hizb al-Wataniyy,” accessible via:

Benbrika, one of the most active followers of the Qadiriyya order, to establish a council of shaykhs for all Sufi orders, in order to counter the Salafist tide in the country and preserve the religious authority of the State represented in the Maliki school of jurisprudence.<sup>590</sup>

Meanwhile, in Morocco, the instrumentalization of Sufism was indirect, by riding the wave of the political culture that the *zawaya* were working to spread among their followers. Its instrumentalization today is carried out more directly and transparently through the integration of these *zawaya* into the circles of power as they confront various Islamist organizations. This practice manifested itself clearly in the launch of a restructuring process in the religious sphere, aiming to delineate a new religious policy that recalibrates the balance between religion and politics.<sup>591</sup> It is in this context that the Qadiriyya Boutchichiyya order came out honestly and clearly to say that it is hostile to none and rejects all conflict. Its shaykh Hamza al-Qadiri al-Boutchichi has always insisted on the need for unity, calling on Moroccans of all affiliations and inclinations to renounce their differences and disputes and to work for the benefit of the country and mankind, and to rally to this end around the Commander of the Faithful, His Majesty Mohammed VI.<sup>592</sup>

In Syria, Sufism enjoys high-level patronage and heavy presence in the structures of power. The late Grand Mufti Ahmed Kuftaro was a shaykh of the Naqshbandiyya order, and the renowned Shaykh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Bouti was a Sufi. The ruling Baath Party and the People's Council include a number of Sufi followers, and Sufi

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<sup>590</sup> See: 'Abd al-Rahman Abu Rumi, "al-Qadiriyya fi al-Jaza'ir Basmat fi al-Din wa-l-Siyasa," accessible via: <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/islamyoon/sufi-orders/107115-2008-06-09%2000-00-00.html>

<sup>591</sup> See: Abbas Boughalem, "Sufiyyat al-Maghrib Ri'aya Rasmiyya wa-Da'm Amrika," accessible via: <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/islamyoon/sufi-orders/105281-2008-03-16%2019-13-50.html>

<sup>592</sup> See: Abbas Boughalem, "Al-Zawaya al-Budshishiyya bi-l-Maghrib Qariba min al-Sulta Ba'ida 'an al-Hizb," accessible via: <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/islamyoon/sufi-orders/106259-2008-06-26%2000-00-00.html>

orders have supported the party and blessed the Assad regime of the late father and the ruling son.

In Libya, the Sufi orders were loyal to the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, and they made a number of statements of support and loyalty to the regime during the popular revolution.<sup>593</sup> In Tunisia, Sufism enjoyed state patronage and support during the rule of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, becoming an integral part of the political system with an increasingly important role to counter political Islam, especially the Ennahda Party, and legitimize the regime.<sup>594</sup>

The process of integrating Sufism and its political instrumentalization redoubled after the revolutionary uprisings that swept the Arab world in early 2011, which ushered the Islamist movements to the forefront of the scene. In this context, Sufi orders differed in their attitudes and positions vis-à-vis the revolutions that took place in the Arab world, with some orders casting a negative judgment on the Arab revolutions, leading Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi to declare that Sufism “dishonored the Arab revolutions” through a toxic culture that associates social disorder with revolting against the rulers.<sup>595</sup>

Sufi attitudes towards revolutions ranged from participation, to silence, to condemnation. Shaykh Mohamed el-Shahawy, president of the International Sufi Council and leader of the Shahawiyya order, acknowledged that most, if not all, Sufi orders shifted their position regarding the late regime after the success of the January 25 revolution in Egypt. He said: “The Sufi orders based their position on the former regime and its president on the Qur’anic principle of ‘Obey God, obey His messenger, and those in authority among you.’ This is a

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<sup>593</sup> See: “Mashayikh wa-Muridu al-Turuq al-Sufiyya,” accessible via: <http://www.alshames.com/details.asp?id=15347&page=1>

<sup>594</sup> See: “Bin ‘Ali Yuqdi al-‘Utlā fi Faransa, wa-l-Sufiyya Tuhza bi-Ri‘ayat al-Sulta,” accessible via: [http://www.assabilonline.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1161](http://www.assabilonline.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1161)

<sup>595</sup> Al-Qaradawi, “al-Salafiyya wa-l-Sufiyya Saffahat al-Thawrat,” accessible via: <http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/81221E6F-A724-48F5-9238-A986BD2C8978.htm>

general Sufi principle, but it does not imply obedience to those wrongfully in power; we obey rulers when they merit it.”

The political behavior of Sufi orders tends clearly toward crude realism: they stand with the prevailing authority regardless of its political methods and conduct. The Sufi reversal of position following the success of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt was therefore expected. Sufism has simply returned to its historical dilemma between, on one hand, its dependable religious function as an individual ideology of spiritual salvation through its traditional institutions and a preoccupation with the afterlife, and, on the other hand, the march toward the horizon of modernization and engagement in party politics. After the revolutions, then, Sufi orders were again divided, with most preferring a return to tradition while some resolved to enter into democratic political life and participate effectively through the formation of political parties.

These political transformations among Egypt’s Sufi orders included an attempt to take advantage of the revolution to settle accounts with Shaykh Abdel Hadi al-Qasabi, head of the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, on account of his being a member of both the National Democratic Party and the appointed Shura Council of the former regime. Fifteen Sufi orders issued a statement demanding the removal of the grand Sufi shaykh as a remnant of the National Party and calling for a purge of the Supreme Council. The Supreme Council of Sufi Orders, for its part, under the leadership of Dr. Abdel Hadi al-Qasabi and along with the shaykhs of 45 orders, announced its refusal to establish political parties in the name of Sufism, stressing that Sufi activity would continue unaffected by current events.<sup>596</sup>

Eighteen Sufi orders, including the Azmiyya, Shabrawiyya, Sharnoubiyya, and Imbabiyya orders, nevertheless declared their intention to establish a political party that would meet present and future needs, and actualize the principle of citizenship under the banner of “social tolerance.” Sufi shaykhs also called for the Supreme

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<sup>596</sup> See: Sobhy Mujahid, “Al-Majlis al-A’la li-l-Turuq Al-Sufiyya Yarfud Insha’ Hizb Siyasiyy,” accessible via: <http://www.rosaonline.net/Daily/News.asp?id=106059>

Council of Sufi orders to be purged of figures from the Mubarak regime's National Democratic Party. These politically-inclined shaykhs said, "We will wait for the new committee for political parties to determine the nature of our future parties. If religious parties are not authorized, it will be an inclusive political party for all under the leadership of Sufi shaykhs. But if religious parties are allowed, Sufis must have a party, a political entity that defends Sufism and brings together the leaders of Sufi orders, to guide and involve them politically and socially." They further emphasized that "there is nothing that prevents the establishment of a social-political party that brings Sufis together, who number over 15 million by official estimates."<sup>597</sup> Shaykh Mohamed Alaa el-Din Mady Aboul Azayem, shaykh of the Azmiyya order, later announced the establishment of the "Egyptian Liberation Party," a civil party including Egyptian political and economic figures within the framework of the "reform front."<sup>598</sup>

The United Arab Emirates was, in this regard, among the Arab states that adopted the most far-reaching policies in promotion of a "Sunni-Sufi-Ash'ari" Islam to counter extremist Salafist ideology and Islamist movements.

The Emirati strategy evolved over time: from its incubation in 2002, when the UAE began inviting Sufi scholars from Egypt, Syria, Mauritania, Jordan, and Yemen to lectures and competitions, such as the annual Al Burda Festival, to the institutionalization phase exemplified by the establishment of the Tabah Foundation in 2005, which organizes many activities, such as the "Interfaith Harmony" competition and the establishment of the Common Word initiative. Following the events of September 11, these developments took on a clear pattern until becoming firmly established after the Arab uprisings of 2011. New institutions then emerged, such as the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which hosted 700 Sufi scholars to dis-

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<sup>597</sup> See: Iman 'Abd al-Mun'im, "Al-Islamiyyun fi Misr," accessible via: <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/monde/244998.html>

<sup>598</sup> See: Muhammad Na'im, "Al-Tahrir al-Masriyy... Hizb Jadid Yakhruj min Rahm al-Sufiyya," accessible via: <http://65.17.227.84/Web/news/2011/4/645463.html?entry=articlemostsent>

cuss peace and global harmony and promote a moderate vision of Islam, or the Muslim Council of Elders, and Mominoun Without Borders.”<sup>599</sup>

## Conclusion

It is indisputable that we are today witnessing a positive transformation and development in the study of Sufism, which reflects ever more clearly in society’s view of Sufism. The negative stereotypes of Sufism have begun to dissipate, and a number of widespread orientalist and modernist myths about Sufism as an individualist spiritual phenomenon, detached from society, politics, and the state, have been unwoven. It has become clear that Islamic mysticism is an integral part of the Islamic tradition, involving an outstanding interpretive capacity, numerous concrete achievements, and broad theoretical potential. Sufism fits within the context of social movements that are subject to the dynamics of social change. It is a complex historical religious phenomenon of social and individual dimensions. Its structure, composition, and practice comprise numerous schools of thought and approaches to theory and practice. Sufism is inseparable, in its ideological formations and its historical achievements, from the social and material dimension, and its practices have marked the world of politics.

The myth of Sufism’s “return,” which presupposed its absence, has been displaced. It has become clear that Sufism is part and parcel of Arab-Muslim culture and society, that historically it has always been present in the structures of power and state. It was a key player in the fight against and resistance to colonial imperialism and has since been assimilated into the fabric of the Arab and Islamic nation-state. The clichéd myth that casts Sufism as a quietist, essentialist structure that is unsuitable for development and modernization, too, has dissipated. A pluralistic, differentiating view of Sufism now circulates widely. According to this view, Sufism is clearly understood as a tradition that has a tremendous discursive capacity and power of re-

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<sup>599</sup> See: Muhammad ‘Amasha, “Al-Imarat wa-l-Sufiyya fi Misr: Khara’it al-Fikr wa-l-Haraka,” Egyptian Institute for Studies, accessible via: <https://bit.ly/3gSsdGe>

presentation, which is realized through an extremely diverse array of trends, currents, schools of thought, and movements.

After the events of September 11, Sufism was reappraised as a moderate force in the face of radicalism. While the idealization of Sufism in public policy might seem positive at a theoretical level, and certainly attractive to Western powers, it could prove counterproductive in the context of undermining violence. Indeed, Sufi initiatives may possibly have contributed to the very radical tendency against which they were launched.

Sufism's association with imperial powers globally and to authoritarian regimes locally is excessively harmful to Sufism in the long and short term. Recent official efforts to promote state Sufism are problematic not only for society and the State, but also for Sufism itself. Sufism's positioning within the policies of the War of Terror deepens sectarian divisions and social polarization, and turns many Sufi leaders, shrines, and *zawaya* into legitimate targets of violence, as front liners in the War on Terror.

Thrusting Sufism into the crossfire of power and war, and the growing trend toward politicization, create dangerous sectarian divisions within a policy framework of mobilization, thereby turning society and the state into battlefields on which Sufism faces off with Salafism. Intellectual confrontation between Sufis and Salafis is old news, but what is new is the targeting of Sufi figures, *zawaya*, and shrines, which cannot only be explained by the rise of the Salafist tide generally and of its jihadi form specifically. Salafist currents have existed for decades without stepping beyond the bounds of intellectual confrontation. But now with the policies of the War on Terror, questions are being raised from various parts of the Muslim world, such as: What happens when Sufis are made into agents of U.S. interests in a time when the Americans themselves become too distant a target for these groups to reach? According to Alix Philippon, when the state, particularly the authoritarian state, attempts to ride the wave of a given Islamic movement in order to achieve controversial political objectives, the movement in question often finds itself weakened. In this context, we might ask ourselves whether the far-reaching



promotion of Sufism in the U.S. War on Terror, and a possible view among active jihadist forces that it is an instrument in the hands of a neo-imperial power, might in part explain why Sufi shrines after September 11 became a staging ground for attacks perpetrated by armed radical groups, which claimed the lives of countless Sufis.<sup>600</sup>

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<sup>600</sup> See: Alix Philippon, “al-Sufiyya ka-Wasila li-l-Harb ‘ala al-Irhab.”

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These pages comprise a series of specialized studies on Sufism and the social, cultural, and political manifestations of Islamic mysticism in the world today. The authors are a group of leading experts on the matter hailing from seven different countries – Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Senegal, Bosnia and Herzegovina – and they broach a broad array of social, political, and cultural issues related to Sufism, in terms of both its intellectual and spiritual thought and its concrete realizations.

The idea for this book emerged amid resurgent talk of Sufism and mysticism, or what some scholars have called an ongoing global “Sufi awakening.” This revival can be seen in the remarkable wave of interest for the sayings and writings of Sufism’s emblematic historical figures – such as Muhyi al-Din ibn ‘Arabi, Jalal al-Din Rumi, Ibn ‘Ata’ al-Iskandari, Dhu al-Nun al-Misri, Abu al-Yazid al-Bistami, al-Hallaj, and others. It also is present in the flurry of activity and attempts at renewal among many Sufi orders and institutions that can be witnessed at various local, regional and global levels, as well as in the worldwide resurgence of spirituality.

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