

Tayob

Turning to the core: Sufism on the Rise?

The broad story of Europe is familiar to us. With the rise of science, rationalism and industrialization, the Church lost its undisputed authority in society. From the time that the sixteenth-century Polish student Copernicus demonstrated a competing theory of the earth and the solar system, the Church had to give way to other systems of truth. This did not, as it is popularly believe, lead to the immediate elimination of religion. Rather, religion was redefined as a private and personal matter. With the progressive secularization of society, moreover, some Europeans and Americans turned increasing to the mystical and spiritual foundations of religions, particularly eastern religions.

Thus, it is not suprising to find that for most of the 20th century, Western scholars of Islam were fascinated with Sufism at the same time as Muslims rejected it, or at least suspected that it was the root cause of our problems. Since Muhammad Abduh characterized Sufism as an innovation (*bid'ah*), many others have followed. Generally, Sufism was regarded as the source of superstition among Muslims and their continuing disrepute in the modern world. This rejection was matched by its popularity among those in the West looking for spiritual fulfillment.

It seems that we are beginning to see a reversal among Muslims, which is now palpable in South Africa as well. Sufism has always been around, but the proliferation of books on Sufism is quite remarkable and likewise the increasing number of circles of *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah). In the Western Cape, in particular, the two community radio stations have had regular and open discussions on Sufism. The hosts on these programmes are deeply involved in promoting Sufism in the Cape, and offer advice and guidance over the air. Dr. Yusuf da Costa and Imam Hasan Walele, to name only the most prominent, have become the mentors for many seeking spiritual guidance. Both are now Naqshbandi teachers, even though Dr. da Costa previously also had permission (*ijazah*) to initiate into the Qadiri order.

The Internet has also witnessed a proliferation of sites too many to mention. However, Cape Town's Azzavia webpage celebrates the long Sufi tradition of the mosque, as well as the 1997 visit of Shaykh Alawi Maliki from Medina. Like the Jamiat website mentioned elsewhere in this review, the Azzavia is worth a visit (home.pix.za/mf/mfj1/). It

seems that quite a number of people are turning to the Web to satisfy their mystical quests. The Web is supplementing the regular means of attending *dhikr* circles, and pledging allegiance to the Sufi master.

It must be mentioned, of course, that Sufism has never completely disappeared from Muslim society. In order to understand its present appeal, however, it is important to remember that Sufism enjoyed a particular location and appeal in the immediate past. This is true of other Muslim countries as it is true of South Africa. In South Africa, Sufism was the mainstay of Indian Muslims who continued their links with the great saints in the past. In this regard, the Qadari-Ashrafi under the leadership of Qasim Zalgonker order in Grassy Park provides both a spiritual link and an ethnic identity for its followers. Also, the Barelwi tradition in India had tenaciously held on the celebration of the Sufi saints against the criticisms of Deoband-linked ulama. In South Africa, this meant the popularity of Sufism among prominent Memon traders and working class Muslims, particularly around the celebration of the death anniversaries of Soffie Saheb and Basdha Peer. The appeal of Sufism was thus restricted to ethnic identities and particular advocacy groups. According to Hasan Walele, this particular focus of Sufi politics, and its overtly Indian character, had not endeared him to it.

In the Western Cape, Sufism had a grand list of visionaries in the 17th and 18th centuries and the pilgrimage to their shrines nurtured the link with the mystical tradition of Islam. However, here too, one may speak with difficulty about a truly mystical tradition. Sufi practices had become part of the identity of the community in the throes of slavery and second-class status. Qadiri practices pervaded Muslim practices on Thursday night *dhikr* meetings, but without the spiritual linkages of shaykh and murids. In fact, a person attending a particular mosque was called a murid of the mosque. This shows to what extent Sufism had become integrated into the general religious life of Islam in the Western Cape.

The quest for spirituality in the new Sufism seems different, but not easy to define. What is certainly true is that, throughout the country, Sufi practices are no longer criticized for being bid`ah (religious innovation). Certain individuals from South Africa have come into contact with a variety of orders and have founded circles and in some cases small lodges. Whereas previously, the Sufi family in Durban with the Chisti order was the most prominent, we now have Naqshbanidis (Da Costa and Walele in Cape Towns), Qadiris in Johannesburg (Chopdat), Durban (Mawlana Palmer) and Cape Town, and two Alawi groups in Cape Town

(Mahdi Hendricks and Seraj and Ahmed Hendricks). There are many others as well, too many to mention in a short review.

The proliferation of orders does not mean the emergence of distinctive traditions. There is a general trend of sharing and participating in the conventions of the orders. This has broken down barriers and also the identities promoted by the various orders. If one looks at the popular books of Shaykh Fadlullah Haeri, for instance, the focus rests on consciousness and awareness on one's spirituality, and very little on the identity of the group as such. At a public level, moreover, a teacher would often put together *dhikr* formulas from a number of groups, depending on the needs of the audience. A second new trend noticeable is that Sufi initiation does not make the almost legendary demands on initiates and even the principal disciples (*khalifahs*). Waiting three years at the door of the Shaykh is not the usual prospect of a would-be seeker. It seems that the Sufi teachers and orders are doing everything in their power to make their spiritual disciplines accessible to Muslims in general.

There seems to be a tendency to break the old boundaries, and a general awareness that the earlier rigours of Sufi discipline should be relaxed. However, from a broad sociological point of view, we also notice some other developments at work. The increasing turn to Sufism comes at the back of a resurgence of political and social interpretation of Islam which began in earnest from the 1970s. Is this a sign that the tables are turning against this more sociological and political approach? Is the turn to Sufism matching the Western turn to mysticism? I would venture to suggest that is precisely the case, even though many Muslims would not like to admit it. The primacy of experience helps to overcome the individual and social problems.

There is certainly a turn towards the experiential dimension of Islam. Even the arch opponents of certain forms of Sufism, the Deobandis, are now **publicly** embracing aspects of Sufism. *Dikhr* circles are not uncommon as religious scholars hear the needs of ordinary Muslims. Many who had been at the forefront on the social and political mission of Islam are turning toward the mystical core of Islam, the relation with God and true self. The most prominent person in this regard is Dr. Yusuf da Costa, but there are others in Kwazulu-Natal as well. This does not mean, of course, that there is a conflict between mystical Islam and political/social/legal Islam. What is clear is that there is an implicit re-ordering of priorities and emphases.

This reordering of priorities and emphases is matched by an unwillingness to deal directly with the earlier suspicions and criticisms. The great control of the shaykhs over blind

followers, the irrationalism of some of the religious claims, are examples of issues that have not been dealt with. In fact, we may even see their re-emergence in unlikely places. In this regard, it seems that the turn to Sufism may be less conscious than I have given it credit. The awareness of symbols, their elusiveness, and the search for the core needs a greater sense of alertness. The return of Sufism is populist, avoiding the difficult questions that face Muslims at the end of the 20th century. In this regard, it is following the tradition of the early Sufis. One exception, certainly in South Africa, is the approach of the Shaykh Siraj Hendricks. In his address to the recent Sufi conference in Washington DC, he challenged the gathering to the plight of women in Islamic societies. Let us hope that this is a good sign for future developments.

There is a palpable turn towards Sufism in South Africa today. Such a turn should be applauded for the hope that it provides for individuals and societies in the throes of change. The tradition of Sufism has much to offer in this regard. However, it is an option that should be taken with both eyes open, and not in a blind leap of faith in the unknown. The Prophet is told in the Qur'an, "This is my way: resting upon conscious insight accessible to reason. I am calling you all to God - I and they who follow me. (Qur'an 12: 108).

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