

The Muslim Almanac: A Reference Work on the Peoples, Cultures and History of Islam

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Muslim spiritual life takes its orientation from the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. As an example, one may cite the famous Qur'anic passage on "the Night of Power," commonly regarded as the night on which the revelation of the Qur'an was delivered to the Prophet: "The Night of Power is greater than a thousand days. The angels and the spirit descended upon it, with the permission of their Lord, with every command" (Qur'an 97:3-4). The act of revelation as a descent of the spirit, and the corresponding movement of the ascension of the Prophet through the heavens to meet God, became the spiritual model for later generations of Muslims. The first examples of organized spiritual life in Muslim circles were formed around outstanding individuals such as al-Hasan al-Basri (d. 728) and Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 778), who brought a pietistic intensity and an ascetic impulse to their meditation upon the meaning of the Qur'anic scripture. These early figures certainly had an impact on their contemporaries, through public preaching and through their writings, and they drew attention to the need for psychological introspection and moral analysis as part of obedience to the commands of God. The first centuries of the Muslim era did not, however, produce formal social structures around these figures of notable piety; when modern scholars speak of a "school of Basra" or a "school of Baghdad" in early Muslim spirituality, it is more of a trend than an organized movement. These leaders formed relations with followers and associates that were informal and highly personal, a pattern that would endure until the formation of organized Sufi "orders" in the twelfth century. Perhaps the only exception to this observation was the retreat for devotees established by the Basran 'Abd al-Wahid ibn Zayd (d. 794) at Abbadan in the Persian Gulf. While it is possible that Christian or Manichaean monastic communities furnished models for this type of retreat, Muslim spiritual circles used a religious vocabulary based entirely on Arabic and Islamic sources.

The outstanding figures of the ninth and tenth centuries, such as Abu Yazid al-Bistami, Junayd al-Baghdadi (d. 910), and others, later became known retrospectively as the central organizers of the Sufi movement. The term *sufi* (from the Arabic word for wool) described their custom of wearing rough woolen cloaks, in imitation of the prophets and holy ones of the past (and in deliberate contrast to the luxurious fabrics of court dress). The two regions of Baghdad (capital of the 'Abbasid caliphate) and northeastern Iran (or Khurasan) were the two most active centers of Sufism. Junayd's one-time disciple al-Hallaj (d. 922) became the center of controversy because of his public proclamation of mystical attainments, and he was cruelly executed after a highly politicized trial. Awareness of tension between mystical experience and more conservative interpretations of Islam led to a series of writings that may be termed apologetic—defenses of the Islamic credentials of Sufism. By the beginning of the eleventh century, a number of Arabic texts had been written as guides to Sufism, summarizing the scriptural basis of Muslim spirituality and the psychological techniques of Sufi meditation. These texts also furnished a biographical and historical concept of Sufism, in which early ascetics and pious leaders were viewed as a series of masters and disciples, who safeguarded and transmitted a mystical knowledge that had originated with the Prophet. Sufism was presented as parallel to the standard Islamic religious sciences, to which it added the internal knowledge of divine realities.

Sufi leaders increasingly were associated with residential hospices (Arabic *ribat* or *zawiya*, Persian *khanqah*), an institution first developed in Iran by a puritanical religious movement known as the *Karramiyya*. Abu Sa'id ibn Abu al-Khayr (d. 1049) established such a center for Sufis in Iran, with codes of conduct for the guidance of novices. Newly arrived Muslim rulers such as the Seljuk Turks found it attractive to sponsor the construction and upkeep of such hospices, along with academies

(madrasas) for the teaching of the Islamic religious sciences. These hospices typically were places for prayer, study of the Qur'an, meditation, and communal meals where travellers and the needy were welcome. Sufi masters would impart instruction and advice to their students and to visitors. Some hospices like the Sa'id al-Su'ada' in Cairo (founded by Saladin in 1173) depended entirely on royal patronage. Other hospices had a broad clientele among the artisan classes, from which many of the Sufi masters came. The hospice of Ruzbihan Baqli (d. 1209) was built in Shiraz in 1165 by stonemasons among his followers. Yet the need of political leaders for religious legitimation put pressure on the new Sufi institutions to become part of the state patronage apparatus, typically through accepting endowment with land-tax income. Thus by 1281, the Mongol rulers of Iran set up an endowment for the previously independent hospice established by Ruzbihan, in this way linking its fortunes with the state. In India, the residences of Sufi masters of the Chishti order were typically one large room where everyone lived and pursued their discipline, unlike the multiple private cells of hospices in Syria and Iran. These "meeting houses" (jama'at khanas) tended to be supported, at least initially, by voluntary donations rather than fixed land income. In Turkey the hospices were known as tekkes. Because of hospitality regulations that required feeding and lodging guests for a limited time, the Sufi hospices became centers where members of different levels of society interacted with the Sufi master.

The next noticeable institutional feature of Sufism was the tomb of the Sufi saint, which increasingly became a focus of local pilgrimage. The Sufi manuals had clarified the status of the "friend of God" or saint, as one who is perfect in obedience to God and who is sustained by the love of God. The saints were seen as the invisible supports of the world, a hierarchy of holy men and women who were under God's protection. While it may have been rare to obtain the direct guidance of such a Sufi saint during his lifetime, there was nothing to prevent people of all classes from seeking the aid of the saint after his demise; saints, it must be recalled, like martyrs, were not regarded as really dead, but were still living and conscious in the grave. In a monarchical society where the average person had to approach authority through local notables, saints could be viewed as people with influence at the court of God. In this way saints became intercessors for those who approached them, both for everyday needs and at the Day of Judgment.

The tombs of many Sufi saints were erected at or near their homes. Under Islamic law, the ownership and maintenance of these tombs fell to family members, who may or may not have had any spiritual aspirations. In subsequent generations, the devotion of many pilgrims thus created a class of hereditary custodians who were in charge of the finances and operations of the tomb- shrines, which could be combined with a functioning hospice where Sufi teaching took place, or with other institutions such as mosques or madrasas. Increasingly, however, the Sufi tomb came to be an independent institution, in some cases functioning as the center of massive pilgrimage at the annual festival of the saint; these festivals were variously termed the saint's birthday (mawlid) in the Mediterranean region, or "wedding" ('urs) in Iran and India, in the latter case symbolically celebrating the death anniversary as the "wedding" of the saint's soul with God. The tombs of especially popular saints eventually were surrounded with royal burial grounds, where kings and members of the nobility would erect their own tombs, to acquire a borrowed holiness or to benefit in the afterlife from the pious exercises of pilgrims to the nearby saints. Examples of this kind of necropolis include the Sufi shrines of Khuldabad and Gulbarga in the Indian Deccan, Tatta in Pakistan, and the various graveyards of Cairo. At some Sufi shrines, where the master's descendants did not possess the spiritual talent of their ancestor, dependence on royal support from land endowment made institutional Sufism into an arm of government, what the Mughal emperor Jahangir called "the army of prayer." Numerous examples are known where the offspring of a Sufi master became government functionaries, as happened with the children and grandchildren of the leader of the Indian Shattariyya, Muhammad Ghawth. Institutionalized shrines added architectural features that incorporated the royal presence into the Sufi tomb itself; this can be seen in royal music galleries added to Chishti tombs in the Indian

Deccan by eighteenth-century patrons, where secular court music would be played whenever the Nizam of Hyderabad chose to visit the shrines.

Sufi tombs and hospices also in many cases became cultural centers as well, where distinctive kinds of music and poetry were heard. Thus the Arabic poetry of the noted Sufi poet Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235) has been regularly recited at his tomb before mass audiences, particularly at his annual festival. Likewise, Indian Chishti shrines continue to be centers for recitation of poetry in musical sessions (*samaʿ*, now known as *qawwali*). At major festivals, such as the *ʿurs* of Baba Farid in Pakistan, one can hear dozens of singers compete for the honor of singing before the saint's tomb, mixing lyrics in Persian with verses in Hindi, Punjabi, Sindhi, and other Indian languages. Special local traditions of music developed in Turkish hospices and shrines, with poetry of a style quite different from court poetry, and performance styles at musical sessions included the measured dance of the Mevlevi Sufis or "whirling dervishes." In North Africa, other distinctive musical styles developed in the Sufi shrines, using Galenic humoral physiological theories to effect healing based on bodily sympathies of particular musical modes.

The most decisive institutional formation of Sufism was the ramification of Sufi orders. A number of outstanding personalities of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries lent their names to associations that developed individual spiritual methods or "ways" (*tariqas*), including special formulations of the names of God for meditative repetition (*dhikr*). Each of these associations became known as a "way" or as a "chain" (*silsila*), with masters and disciples constituting the links. Chains were plotted backward in time to end ultimately with the Prophet Muhammad as the final human figure; some chains are duly depicted as continuing with the angel Gabriel and God as the ultimate sources. Nearly all of these chains reach Muhammad via his son-in-law and cousin 'Ali; frequently there are parallel chains consisting of the early Shi'i imams, who are commonly revered in Sufi circles, even though the majority of Sufi orders have a Sunni orientation. A notable exception is the Naqshbandi order, which reaches the Prophet via Abu Bakr instead, thus preserving an anti-Shi'i tonality unusual in Sufism. While it is convenient to refer to these organizations as "orders," with an implicit analogy to the monastic orders of Christianity (Franciscans, Dominicans, etc.), the analogy is inexact. Sufi orders are much less centrally organized than their Christian counterparts, and they have a more fluid hierarchical structure that is formulated in terms of different types of initiations. Complicating the situation is the phenomenon of multiple initiation, observable since the sixteenth century, through which individual Sufis could receive instruction in the methods of various orders while maintaining a primary allegiance to only one. The major impact of the Sufi orders in terms of religion was to popularize the spiritual practices of the Sufis on a mass scale. The interior orientation of the informal movement of early Sufism became available to a much wider public through participation in shrine rituals, the circulation of hagiographies, and the dispensing of various degrees of instruction in *dhikr* recitation. Elaborate initiation rituals developed, in which the master's presentation of articles such as a dervish cloak, hat, or staff would signify the disciple's entrance into the order. A frequent feature of initiation was the requirement that the disciple copy out by hand the genealogical "tree" of the order, which would link the disciple to the entire chain of masters going back to the Prophet.

Some of the Sufi orders, such as the Qadiriyya (named after 'Abd al-Qadir Jilani, d. 1166), are spread throughout Islamic lands from North Africa to Southeast Asia. Others are more regional in scope, like the Shadhiliyya in North Africa (named after Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili, d. 1258), or the Chishtiyya in India and Pakistan (named after Mu'in al-Din Chishti, d. 1236). Particular orders are known for distinctive practices, such as the loud *dhikr* recitation of the Rifa'iyya, in contrast to the silent *dhikr* favored by the Naqshbandiyya. Some orders, including the Chishtiyya and the Mevleviyya, have integrated music and even dance into their practice, while other orders resolutely shun these activities as distractions to spiritual training. Sometimes Sufi leaders, such as the early Chishti masters, tried to keep political power at arm's length, and they advised their followers to refuse offers of land

endowment. Some Sufi masters would demonstrate their disdain of the world by refusing to entertain rulers or visit them at court.

On the other hand, certain orders have a history of close association with political power; the Suhrawardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya in India and Iran felt it was important to influence rulers in the proper religious direction, and the Bektashiyya had strong links to the elite Ottoman troops known as the Janissaries. The Safawiyya, once a moderate Sunni order based at Ardebil, became widespread among Turkish tribes on the Persian-Ottoman frontier, and it emerged with a strongly Shi'ī and messianic character to become the basis for the Safavid empire that ruled Iran from the sixteenth through the eighteenth century. During the period of nineteenth-century colonialism, when much of the Islamic world fell under European domination, Sufi institutions played varied roles. Hereditary custodians of Sufi shrines in places like the Indian Punjab were treated as important local landlords by colonial officials, and they became further entrenched as political leaders due to British patronage; ironically, the cooperation of these Sufi leaders became essential in later independence movements directed against British control. Similarly, the Senegalese order known as the Muridiyya became heavily involved in peanut farming as a result of being favored by French colonial authorities, and they have emerged in the post-colonial order as a prominent social institution. With the overthrow of traditional elites by European conquest, Sufi orders in some regions remained the only surviving Islamic social structures, and they furnished the principal leadership for anti-colonial struggles in places such as Algeria, Libya, the Caucasus, and China. French administrators in North Africa viewed Sufi orders with suspicion, and colonial scholars produced studies of the Sufi orders designed to predict their possible resistance to or cooperation with official policies.

In the post-colonial period, Sufi orders and institutions have an ambiguous position. Governments in many Muslim countries have inherited the centralized bureaucratic organization of their colonial predecessors, and in countries like Egypt and Pakistan efforts are made to subject the orders and shrines to government control. Officials frequently appear at Sufi festivals and attempt to direct popular reverence for saints into legitimation of their regime. Nonetheless, many of the liveliest Sufi organizations flourish without official recognition. Contemporary fundamentalist movements attack Sufism with a virulence only slightly less intense than that which is reserved for anti-Western diatribes. Pilgrimage to Sufi tombs is frequently denounced as an idolatry that treats humans on the level of God. Sufi orders have been illegal in Turkey since the 1920s, when Kemal Atatürk secularized the Turkish state. The performance of the Sufi rituals such as the “whirling dervish” dance of the Mevleviyya, and the dhikr of the Istanbul Qadiriyya, is tolerated as a cultural activity and is exported abroad through touring companies and sound recordings; the tomb of the great Sufi poet Jalal al-Din Rumi, which many visitors treat as a shrine, is officially regarded as a museum. Sufi activities are not publicly tolerated in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, since Sufi leaders and tomb cults would constitute an unacceptable alternative spiritual authority. Still, it is remarkable that the founders of certain fundamentalist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jama'at-i Islami in India, were exposed to Sufi orders in their youth, and they seem to have adapted certain organizational techniques and leadership styles from Sufism; the main difference is that these movements substitute ideology for Sufi spirituality, in order to become mass political parties in the modern arena.

In recent years, Sufi orders have extended their reach into Europe and the Americas, and today there are branches of orders from India, Iran, North Africa, and Turkey active in major urban centers in many Western countries. Some groups derived from Sufi orders have only tenuous associations with Islam, and they present Sufism as a mystical universal religion that may be pursued through dancing and chanting, without requiring the practice of ritual prayer or other duties of Islamic law. Other groups have more explicit relations with Islamic tradition, including even insistence on the clothing and customs of the order's country of origin. While it is too soon to predict the future of Sufism in the

West, it seems certain to take on some aspects of modern American and European culture, such as joint participation of men and women in contexts where gender separation was the norm in many premodern Muslim societies. At the same time, Sufism in the West strives to preserve many of the distinctive rituals and institutions of traditional Sufism—one notes that the tomb of Bawa Muhaiyuddin in Philadelphia has already become a place of pilgrimage. In any case, Sufi orders are surviving, despite the restrictions of modern governments and the opposition of fundamentalists, and they continue to act as channels that both preserve the influence of saints of the past and make possible a more direct personal access to God and the Prophet through spiritual discipline.