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Changes in Sufism in the American Context

Patrick Hamilton

Since its inception as a religious movement in what most scholars agree to be around the 8th century CE, Sufism has existed in all its forms as a controversial and highly complex sect of Islam. The vast pluralisms which come together to form the sect itself have been sources of skepticism and criticism on an international scale for centuries; syncretic worship elements from several world religious traditions are starkly inconsistent with some forms of mainstream Islam. Similarly, both ancient and modern Sufi devotional practices, including the aesthetic traditions associated with them, have continually been regarded as bastardizations of Islamic tradition. Though the diversified nature of Sufism has probably attracted many free-thinking followers throughout the centuries, it is this same mixture that has garnered scorn and even persecution from the Islamic world. For this reason, it is understandable that Sufism has been allowed to undergo drastic changes in the American context; a predominantly non-Muslim environment, largely free from the constraints of mainstream Muslim norms and state-sanctioned religious monitoring, has rendered lasting changes on Sufism in America. Ethnic diversity within the Muslim population of America has also contributed to Sufi change not only through contact, but by virtue of the fact that its diverse nature has prevented any single Muslim nation from exerting full influence on Muslim America. This distance, coupled with an increased interest in new religious movements in the US since the 1960s, has led to an increase in American Sufi practitioners, and the result has been the reworking of ancient Sufi traditions to fit the American trend of recognizing the individual's connection to worship and religious ideas through the incorporation of scientific concepts. Finally it is crucial to examine the uniquely American shifts in the organization of Sufi communities and places of worship, as the roles of women and members of the Sufi religious elite continue to change in the American context. These community changes share connections to the use of new information technology, which has simultaneously reaffirmed Sufi identities and beliefs and enabled a mere 25,000-strong Sufi population to advertise its presence to millions of Americans.¹ This essay examines the external societal viewpoints and historical circumstances that have allowed American Sufism to enhance its pluralistic approach to the individual's connection

to God and to others, to transform its spiritual foci to incorporate secular concepts, and to adopt new systems of organization in order to continue the Sufi tradition in the modern American arena.

Sufism

In order to understand Sufism in the US, it is important to first have an understanding of the nature of Sufism, along with a grasp of the historical circumstances that shaped Sufism prior to its introduction to the American situation. As with other religious traditions—or even the term “religion”—attempting to define Sufism is a tremendously problematic undertaking. The term “Sufism” is problematic in and of itself; originating from the Arabic word *sufi*, or woolen cloth worn by mystic ascetics, the term entered the West as a blanket label for “islamicate” mystics as observed during 18th-19th century European imperialism.² This Orientalist perspective formed in response to the contrasts that Westerners observed between the much-hated Ottoman Turkish Muslims of the time and the seemingly free-thinking practitioners of Sufism. Because of their apparent love of wine, dance, and poetry (among other assumed distinctions from mainstream Islam in Western eyes), the Sufis were seen in a much more affectionate light by colonialists in the Middle East and South Asia; many Europeans falsely designated Sufism as the offspring of Christianity and Greek philosophy. Though Sufism does indeed synthesize certain elements of these traditions, in combination with elements from other religious movements, it by no means shares them as its parent traditions. This Orientalist attention began the Western misconception that Sufism is separate from Islam, though certain prominent orders (elucidated below) deny connection to any parent religion.

Around the 10th century CE, Muslim scholars and composers of Sufi literature officially began using the term ‘Sufi’ in order to consolidate the general beliefs of the movement for the purpose of expanding interest and knowledge in the subject. One such 10th century scholar, known as Qushayri, collected a list of Sufi sayings from earlier masters in an attempt to offer a set of definitions for the sect. He writes:

Sufism is entry into exemplary behavior and departure from unworthy behavior.

Sufism means that God (Allah) makes you die to yourself and makes you live in him.

The Sufi is single in essence; nothing changes him, nor does he change anything.

The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame.

Sufism means that you own nothing and are owned by nothing.
 Sufism means seizing spiritual realities and giving up on what creatures possess.
 Sufism means kneeling at the door of the beloved, even if he turns you away.
 Sufism is a state in which the conditions of humanity disappear.
 Sufism is a blazing lightning bolt.³

One can see here that the nature of Sufism is at least partially explainable through this scholar's enumeration of spiritual characteristics. Historically, Muslim scholars have agreed on the importance of the Seven Stages of Human Development on the Sufi Path as a guideline for crucial Sufi precepts in human life. The seven stages consist of abstinence, renunciation of all materials that impede one's relationship to God, poverty, patience, trust in God (Allah), and contentment, and they highlight the indispensable nature of monitoring one's conduct towards purity.⁴ In this way, they exist not only as framework for the maximization of the person, but also for the enhancement of Sufi communities.

By observing these concepts, one can attain the ultimate goal: maximizing the potential of one's relationship with Allah. The notion that this is what Sufis strive to achieve above all else has garnered a great deal of negative opinions from the mainstream Muslim world for centuries, as it places adherence to Islamic text in a less crucial light. This tension appears to have coincided with the inception of Sufism in Central Asia and the Middle East, but it reached its peak in the 10th and 11th centuries CE in Persia. The religious persecution of Sufis that characterized the time actually restricted many Sufi practitioners to a "safer" Islamic lifestyle, concealing their mystical practices under the guise of mainstream Islam.⁵

This persecution was denounced three centuries later by Persian authorities, but political and interpersonal tensions continue to exist between mainstream Muslims and Sufis today. As recently as the 1970s, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran—was a private scholar of theoretic Islamic mysticism, but scorned public practice of it. This was common in early Persia; as well, when the separation of the religio-political elite from the masses was necessary to quell the possible rise of religious rivals. It is for this reason that the term "dervish," from the Persian *darvish*, synonymous with "poor," "evil," "heretical," and a range of other negatives, has come to serve as a derogatory term for Sufis in Iran; it separates them from mainstream followers of Islam as a threatening and undesirable demographic.

Negative public- and state-promulgated opinions are not limited to slander, however. Pakistan, for instance, has laws specifically designed to control any Sufi

behavior that could be deemed “offensive” to Muslims. Punishments for such infractions have been unbelievably harsh, even during the last few decades.⁶ From a historical perspective, Sufism—despite its relationship to Islam—has been at odds with Shi’a Islam since its beginnings as the dominant religion in Iran during the Safavid reign of the 1500s.⁷ Wahhabbi Islam, which is the predominant sect in Saudi Arabia, shares many of its main precepts with the Deobandi schools (*madrasas*) of the Pakistani-Iranian border. Both are generally considered vast deviations from the original Qu’ran, and their ideas concerning interpretation of Islamic text extend far beyond those of mainstream Shi’a and Sunni Islam. The Wahhabbi and Deobandi interpretations allow absolutely no room for any Quranic construction that does not strictly adhere to their own precepts, which is why they are so vehemently opposed to Sufism.⁸

It seems that the obvious behavioral inconsistencies with mainstream Islam, and specifically with the Shi’a, Wahhabbi, and Deobandi forms, have been main sources of contention between the sects. One major factor contributing to this in history was the relationship between saint and disciple portrayed in pre-Renaissance Persian Sufi art and literature. This art, which is acclaimed for its careful use of perspective far before Dutch painters in the West began to implement it, commonly depicted the saint-disciple relationship in sexual form. This explicit homosexual element, though many claim it was merely a metaphor for the intimate relationship between instructor and pupil, went beyond the limitations of appropriate Islamic art to not only portray human figures, but to do so in a way that was markedly inconsistent with Muslim moral codes.⁹ This, in addition to the textual loose-constructionist viewpoints common to Sufism, contributed to historic aversion to the faith. One could argue that this same disregard for the precepts that many consider to be central to Islam exists today, and that it continues to influence external negative opinions.

Though it has scarcely come in forms as violent as in other nations, societal criticism against Sufis is still present in the Judeo-Christian US. Many American Shi’a and Sunni Muslims who disagree with the categorization of Sufism as part of Islam ascribe such “lumping in” of the Sufi sect to the American media’s tendency to holistically target Islamic life as the “American Enemy.” They believe that the perceived similarities between Sufi and mainstream Muslim identities are at once a cultural misunderstanding and an ignorance-driven insult.¹⁰

Pluralism in Sufism

It appears that the presence of Sufism in the ethnographic and religious di-

versity of America has had a strong effect on self-categorization within the Sufi population. It is important to note that a strong majority of members of newer Sufi movements in the US are Euro-Americans.¹¹ Among them and fellow Sufi but foreign-born Muslims, there is a range of self-proclaimed affiliation with mainstream Islam, with Caucasians and African Americans predominantly representing the less *Shari'a*-oriented movements. Communities comprising first- and second-generation Sufi immigrants from Central and South Asia and the Middle East tend to identify more closely with mainstream Islam.¹² In many instances, connection to a mother faith whose nomenclature extends beyond Sufism depends on the prevailing ideology of the particular order or place of worship. The Sufi Universalist organization known as the Sufi Order International (formerly the Sufi Order of the West), for example, strongly denies any connection to Islam, while members of many of its contemporary organizations disagree with that distinction.¹³

Though Sufism has always been a historically syncretic sect, it is apparent that the “American” demographic changes in membership have effected a change in the sense of identification with Islam. Hermansen cites a range of reasons for these changes, which she refers to as the “gradualization and hybridization” of Islamic concepts. According to her, Caucasian and African American involvement in new Sufi movements in America has been characterized by “gradualization and hybridization”—that is to say, by the primary introduction of syncretic New Age religious concepts, such as eastern meditation, breathing exercises, and different ways of understanding the self, followed by the gradual incorporation of mainstream Islamic ideas into worship. This trend in non-Muslim conversion to Sufism in America derives from the metaphysical curiosity of many agnostics over the past few decades; the relationship between mainstream Islam and Sufism was gradually visible to the alternative-religion-seeking converts over time, and it has thus found its way into the lives of Caucasian and African American Sufi converts.¹⁴ This can be observed in members of the Sufi Order International. Pir Vailayat Khan, the leader of the Order, strongly encourages members to devote themselves to understanding concepts pertaining to holistic healing, as well as those of “New Age and Eastern spirituality.”¹⁵ The emphasis of these elements in the Sufi Order International’s version of Sufism is one piece of evidence to support the notion that a self-separation from “Mother Islam” has steered some Sufis in the direction of adopting practice-oriented characteristics from other religious traditions.

Generally, those who adhere more closely to the precepts of mainstream Islam seek guidance from *Shari'a*, but their connection to Allah still takes precedence over adherence to religious texts. This is a notion that is shared throughout the Sufi

faith; emphasis on the importance of personal involvement above the understanding of religious text has always been essential to Sufism, and it continues to be a source of skepticism from the external world. Despite this inconsistency with mainstream Islam, the nature of Sufi spiritual beliefs has inspired many American Sufis to seek counsel and interaction with other New Religious Movements in healing practices; in this way, the inherent pluralistic qualities of Sufism encourage interaction with other faiths in America, and in doing so reshape that pluralism. A perfect example of this can be observed among Sufi Universalist practitioners of the American Sufi Islamiyat Ruhaniyat Society, the ideas of which are heavily centered on issues pertaining to psychotherapeutic practices. Members of the Society are encouraged to engage in yogic breathing techniques and the chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra during worship, all the while incorporating Christian, Jewish, and Islamic prayers at given intervals. This is all conducted with the intention of “attuning” to ones inner being as a means of cleansing the system of negative emotions and elements.¹⁶

It is worth noting that members of the American Sufi Islamiyat Ruhaniyat Society also believe in seven energy points on the body as being places of resonance with God during worship. This may have contributed to American Sufi compatibility with the Hare Krishnas, as well as with a range of New Religious Movements, as body-centricity appears to be a shared interest in the devotional and meditational aspects of both arenas. Minimally, it exists as a strong consistency between the ideas of American Sufism and those of other religious movements.

Similarly, members of the American Jerrahi Movement have enjoyed a strikingly pluralistic approach to spiritual identity. Its former leader, Sheikh Nur al-Jerrahi (1941-1995), was an expert in comparative mysticism. He was once categorized as “an orthodox priest on Monday, a Buddhist lama on Tuesday, a Khalifa on Thursday—Christian among Christians, Muslim among Muslims.”¹⁷ American Jerrahis continue to live by these standards, and their pluralistic methodology is a direct result of their experience as a uniquely American Sufi movement.

Sufism and Western Secular Texts

One of the main changes that the American religious landscape has rendered on Sufi traditions deals with the interpretation of dreams as spiritual guidelines, especially in the predominantly Caucasian and African American Sufi communities. As mentioned earlier, this demography demonstrates the most obvious deviation from mainstream Islam in the American Sufi spectrum.

The importance of dreams has always been a main precept of traditional Sufism, and it is largely consistent with other forms of mysticism throughout the

world. In Central and South Asia and the Middle East, Sufi practitioners often recount their dreams to the sheikh, or local Sufi religious leader, and he in turn offers an interpretation in relation to Sufi or mainstream Islamic concepts. In the modern American scene, the dreams of practitioners sometimes have no consistent themes with traditional religious dream consultation ideas. As a result, for the aforementioned Caucasian and African American Sufi communities, a very unique secular substitution has replaced the importance of dream texts in American Sufism: Western psychotherapeutic models.¹⁸ The deemphasizing of religious traditions in favor of Western scientific literature used in the execution of very spiritual customs is something that has occurred strictly in the West, far from the inter- and intra-faith pressures of Sufi origins.

These Western psychotherapeutic models, which were originally set forth by psychologists such as Carl Jung, have taken root in the Sufi Order International, as well as in many American Sufi movements, as the foundations of self-awareness and dream-interpretation in relation to the individual's connection to God. As with ancient Sufi beliefs, these models suggest that dreams provide access to a deeper understanding of the inner self. The new importance of Jungian psychology to American Sufism has brought the role of the Sheikhs closer to that of the psychiatrist or psychologist; it is because of this new motion that representatives from the Sufi Psychological Association have begun to teach and consult at many clinical psychology programs at US universities.¹⁹

Similarly, recent American Sufi activity has highlighted inverse correlations between Western ego-psychology and traditional Sufi life and worship guidelines, and this information has been offered as lifestyle advice in modern American Sufi literature. The Seven Stages of Human Development on the Sufi Path, for example, offer a chronology of lifetime worship strata that seem to follow a backwards reading of Erickson's "Eight Ages of Man" ego-psychological model. The seven stages, which include abstinence, renunciation of all materials that impede one's relationship to God, poverty, patience, trust in God, and contentment, progress *against* the flow of man's undesirable slip into the development of the superego. Here one can see the Sufi modification of the self towards what Erickson considered to be the unadulterated, ego-less psychological state.²⁰ Sufi literature suggests that, following the opposite direction of Erickson's model, one can maximize the potential of the connection to one's inner self. This comes as a direct result of Sufi contact with the recent American obsession with the concept of "self help," and it has found its way into the relationship between American Sufis and their intrapersonal religious identities. In this way, the adaptation of secular texts to be put to use towards

religious practices and concepts has enabled Sufism to maintain and enhance its devotional goals in the American context.

From another perspective, a transformation of the physical aspects of devotion in American Sufism has occurred. The famed Mevlevi “whirling dervishes” who can be seen in Egypt, Turkey, and Central Asia today—those whose circular dance practices transport them to a trance-like state, arguably garnering even more criticism from mainstream Muslims²¹—have been replaced among American Sufis with “spiritual walking,” listening to sacred music, and performing other light dancing rituals.²² These appear to be conducted with the same devotional intensity, but with the same coherent state, as the Hare Krishna *kirtan* dancing—that is, grounded to a calmer, more organized method of worship, rather than in such a high-energy manifestation. Interestingly enough, this toning-down of ritual practice in a less conservative environment goes against the trends in behavioral liberalization following the introduction of Sufism to the West, but still points to alterations in Sufism in the US.

Structure and Community

As mentioned earlier, Sufism has been the brunt of external criticism and skepticism since its inception as an Islamic sect. Over the past few decades, large-scale societal ignorance about the nature of Sufism has caused many people to continue questioning its existence as a legitimate branch of Islam, and criticism of its ideas has arisen in response to its assumed relationships to other New Religions Movements in America. Gisela Webb attributes the lack of scholarship on the situation of the American Sufi to a sense of skepticism and perceived illegitimacy caused by Sufism’s untimely rise in popularity during the 1960s, when an explosion of interest in “religions of the East” inspired much capricious devotion in American anti-war youth. This happenstance also served to stoke skepticism on the part of the many American mainstream Muslims, as it made Sufism appear to be a mere “counter-cultural” phenomenon with no real connection to spirituality.²³ This, naturally, has been an external opinion that has rendered lasting effects on Sufi communities. In New York, there has been a regional adaptation and reworking of religious street processions (*julus*) held regularly for the purpose of increasing awareness in the Judeo-Christian and mainstream Muslims populations. Contrary to *julus* in Central Asia and the Middle East, some *julus* in New York almost resemble protests; Sufi precepts are printed in the English language on banners specifically to advertise community solidarity and reaffirm Muslim identity.²⁴ This is done largely in an attempt to legitimize Sufism in the arena of American religious life.

Interestingly enough, some scholars point to the origins of the perceived need to demonstrate an Islamic Sufi community identity and legitimacy in the Parliament of World's Religions in Chicago in 1893. Many scholars consider this to be a crucial turning point in the conveyance and subsequent popularization of scholarly religious information.²⁵ As the popularity of Sufism continues to increase in the US, methods of communicating Sufi ideas are changing to conform to the use of such scholarly conferences and information technology. This change is a shift in organizational strategies from traditional Sufism.

Throughout history, Sufism has exerted a strong influence on economic and political affairs, from the family level all the way to matters concerning central government, and this energy has been put to use towards advertisement and information technology in the US. Sheikhs and other religious elite hold annual seminars on Sufi psychology, self help, medicine, and connections to Islam, and they are sometimes widely televised. The internet and television have also become strong tools for spreading Sufi concepts and connecting Sufi communities internationally. Hisham Kabbani, leader of the Naqshbandi Kabbanis, asked C-SPAN and a variety of cable TV networks to cover his first Islamic Unity Conference to discuss matters pertaining to Sufism in the US, and he even held an audience with President Clinton. This meeting with the President was photographed for the cover of *Muslim Magazine*—a move that many consider to be somewhat of a turning point in the public opinion of Sufism.²⁶

From a structural standpoint, the arrangement of a system of governance in Sufi organizations and places of worship is something that has arisen in response to American societal circumstances. One such organization, the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship of Philadelphia (a branch of the Qadri Order), set up committees to deal with matters pertaining to the Sufi stances on modern issues in America. They function almost as a court for the 1,000-member-strong fellowship, and they vote on the appointment of imams and sheikhs. Historically, and abroad, this has been the responsibility of the Sheikh alone; he usually chooses a successor based on the individual's ability to recite a complete genealogy of the religious elite of the particular order. Redistributing this power to a governing body comprising members of the organization appears to be a strictly American innovation, and it deemphasizes the importance of heritage and Qadri genealogy to the religious decision-making process of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.²⁷

Webb highlights the ideological transformations of this particular Sufi community in relation to the structural changes mentioned above. She lists the esoteric, interpersonal contextualization of the Arabic prayer, "La Ilaha Illa Allah"—

"There Is no God but God," a new definition for the American renunciation of sacrilegious materials, and a new sense of self in relation to God as the main shifts she observed in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship. These changes, she explains, have helped the members of the organization to reconcile traditional Sufi concepts with the changing modernity of the American religious landscape.²⁸

Beyond these organizational alterations, gender roles appear to have made significant shifts since the inception of certain Sufi movements in the United States. The Askijerrahis, an offshoot of the American Jerrahi branch mentioned earlier, began in 1985 under the direction of a female teacher, Sheikha Fariha Fatima al-Jerrahi. She is the first female Jerrahi leader in over 300 years. Her status as a sheikha grants her special permission to enter sacred sites normally reserved only for men, and her challenge to these traditions has inspired a female community identity within her organization that has been deemed subversive by other Sufi branches.²⁹

It is crucial to understand the concept of American-induced change on Sufism in the context of its contact with American spiritual diversity, but it is equally important to avoid the fallacy that America is an example of unwaveringly tolerant pluralism. Still, it can be said that the religious tensions inherent in the Middle East and Central and South Asia have probably acted as structural and ideational impediments to the Sufi situation since its inception as a sect. The main difference between the Sufi experience in those regions and that of the US is that state-sanctioned physical intervention in the form of violence has not been as much of an issue in America. Moreover, the state campaigns to eradicate Sufism from the Muslim world were conducted during the first few centuries of Islam in Persia, and were later denounced in the 12th and 13th centuries.³⁰ Because this large-scale violence is historically distant, and current international stresses seem to affect small, exclusive Sufi communities or mere individuals, there has not been a very strong American Sufi refugee movement. As mentioned earlier, many practitioners of American Sufism are Euro-Americans from Judeo-Christian backgrounds. Consequently, American Sufism has not responded as strongly to the needs of the devout religio-political refugee.³¹ The relatively small Muslim population of the US, combined with a lingering lack of understanding of Islam, also contributes to a lack of assembly in response to racial or ethnic tensions. Of all the mosques in the US, only a few are strictly for followers of the Sufi sect.³² The resulting perceived identity on the part of exterior parties seems to remain one of "New-Wave" or "flakey" characteristics, and the internally-perceived Sufi American identity continues to depend on the interpretations of the individual Sufi organizations. Some,

like Werbner's proud New York community, continue to insist on their connection to Islam; others, like the Sufi Order International, deny any affiliation with a mother religion.³³

Again, being careful not to sing the praises of American religious tolerance, one can still see how this sort of intra-faith ideological pluralism has been a recent byproduct of the American situation. Muslim views, both within and outside of the US, have combined with global historical circumstances to help shape this complex identity as well. At the very least, one can observe the concrete manifestations of American-wrought pluralistic changes to the Sufi religion in the praxis realm. A metamorphosis from the importance of religious concepts to the incorporation of Western psychological literature is direct evidence of changes that have occurred in a new location, and subsequent changes in the physical involvement of the Sufi practitioner can be seen in alterations in devotional dances and meditation. Though it is impossible to assign a blanket identity to the multifaceted nature of American Sufi groups, these transformations have outlined the framework for the creation of new *individual* Sufi identities. New interpretations of the individual's relationship to God (Allah) in American Sufism have arisen from the fresh start of a new location, along with the increased importance of Western secular literature to spiritual practices and a reshaping of American Sufi religious structural organization, and these changes have been met with new American challenges to Sufi ideology. In this way, shifts and divisions in Sufi identity in the American context have been accompanied by shifts in external pressures, and this tension continues to be a contributing force in the reshaping of Sufism as a religion in the US. These alterations serve to highlight the difficulties in defining a religious movement; changes in the diaspora of America have deepened the complexity of Sufism as a sect of Islam, and it is apparent that the only way to examine it and understand it properly is through the careful analysis of the experiences of Sufi communities and individuals throughout their history in American religious landscape.

NOTES

(Endnotes)

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14. Hermansen, "Movements," 43.
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17. Rocher and Charqaoui, quoted in Hermansen, "Movements," 56.
18. Hermansen, "Healing," 415-418.
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32. Webb, 98-100.
33. Werbner, 181.

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