Sufi Thought and its Reconstruction

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The Fluctuating Fate of Twentieth-Century Sufism

In 1900 the vast majority of Muslims understood Islam as mediated to them, directly or indirectly, by Sufi shaykhs and traditional ulama who accepted Sufism as the inner, spiritual dimension at the heart of Islam. Despite critiques of their excesses and aberrations over the centuries, Sufi leaders still appeared in a strong position to confront their opponents and influence the general Muslim public. Sufis operated at all levels of society and were found among the highest ranks of the scholarly establishment through to the pious among the working class of the great cities and village shaykhs and enraptured wandering beggars. While some Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*), such as the Qadiriyya, attracted members across a range of countries, racial groups and classes, others were more regionally or even locally based and might draw on particular tribes, professions or socio-economic categories.

Many ordinary affiliates of Sufi brotherhoods may not have felt themselves to be deeply involved in pursuing the mystical path to enter a special relationship of closeness to God; they may not have shared Ibn 'Arabi's understanding of Sufism as 'assuming the character traits of God'. Only a few of 'God's friends' (awliya'Allah), the great mystic saints, could truly participate in such a level of Sufism.

So how might the great majority have viewed their enterprise? It is highly likely that many would have been in agreement with a number of Sufis interviewed in Egypt much later in the century and who responded that for them Sufism meant 'purification of the heart, sincerity of worship and renunciation of fleshly passions'. All this was to be achieved by a variety of individual and collective pious exercises of prayer and meditation, cultivating remembrance of God (*dhikr*) and developing devotion to the Prophet and one's shaykh. Private and shared experiences of the miraculous, analysis of dreams and visions, visits to saintly tombs and attendance at festivals formed part of the process of engagement with Sufism.

Muslim leadership was still to a very great extent influenced by Sufi thinking as the century opened. In the major Islamic state of the Ottoman Empire, Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II (r. 1876-1909) was prone to listen to the guidance of Arab Sufis in his entourage, including arguably his closest spiritual mentor, the Rifa'i shaykh Abu al-Huda al-Sayyadi from the neighbourhood of Aleppo in Syria. The Sultan also saw the Sufi leaders as a valuable tool in promoting his pan-Islamic policy and claims to the Caliphate; he consequently gave his backing to their *tariqas* and supported the publication of their works, while suppressing alternative viewpoints whether they were seen as issuing from anti-Sufi Wahhabism or Western rationalism. Wahhabism was temporarily at a weak point, as the second Saudi Wahhabi state had collapsed in 1887 and the Saud family were living in exile in Kuwait, although their fortunes were about to change.

Elsewhere, in Muslim lands under the rule of European colonial powers, it was often Sufi *tariqa* heads who were being seen by those powers as crucial to maintaining harmonious relations with the Muslim communities. By 1900 brotherhoods in a number of areas were involved in some degree of collaboration with non-Muslim government, although some could prove tough negotiators on behalf of their people and cause ongoing anxiety to the occupiers. A notable example is that of Lalla Zaynab (c. 1850-1904), a remarkable saintly woman and powerful figure within the Algerian Rahmaniyya. She alarmed French officials with her rebelliousness and ability to drive a hard bargain, just as she was adored by the thousands of North Africans flocking to her *zawiya* in search of blessing and education. A foreign Woman visitor to the district in 1912 noted: 'So beneficent had been her sway, so charitable was she that "her memory is still green in the hearts of her people".' This level of closeness to the people's hearts seems hardly to have been experienced by the circle of reformists around Muhammad 'Abduh in Egypt or the followers of Sayyid Ahmad Khan in India.

However, by mid-century Sufi fortunes had undergone a dramatic change in certain parts of the Muslim world. Lamenting the supposedly sad state of Sufism in 1950, A. J. Arberry remarked that it 'may now be said to have come to an end as a movement dominating the minds and hearts of learned and earnest men'. For him, as a literary scholar of the classical Arabic and Persian tradition, the 'learned and earnest men' were the great intellectuals, mystics and poets, especially those of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries represented by such as Ibn al-Farid, Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi. Yet even given his personal enthusiasm for the earlier age, Arberry is willing to concede the survival of occasional spiritual figures worthy of note into the twentieth century. The latest to whom he grants some space is a Naqshabandi shaykh of Irbil in Iraq,

Muhammad Amin al-Kurdi, who died in 1914. But he believed that Sufism had now become the preserve of the 'ignorant masses' and was no longer relevant for the modern, educated Muslim.

Arberry's focus was on the central Middle East, the region where there was the most visible decline in Sufi numbers by the 1950s. He was certainly not alone in regarding Sufism there as appealing primarily to the traditional, working-class membership of the *tariqas* and in expecting it to lose support further and, ultimately, to disappear with increasing exposure to scientific education. A growing number of Middle Eastern Muslims held not dissimilar views, including many vociferous critics of Sufis as an anachronistic embarrassment to Muslim societies seeking paths to modernisation.

A mixed array of anti-Sufi forces had been gaining ground steadily during the first half of the century, but especially since the 1920s. Prominent among them were nationalists and secularisers, perhaps the most significant being Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, who saw the Sufi brotherhoods as a reactionary and subversive element in the newly established Republic of Turkey and ordered their suppression in 1925, closing their centres (*tekkes*) and saints' tombs; in his eyes, there was simply no place in a land aspiring to become a secular, modern nation-state for those he deemed so 'primitive' as to turn to Sufi shaykhs for guidance. But the traditional anti-Sufism of the Wahhabis also discovered a new strength in the Arabian Peninsula with Ibn Saud's capture of the Hijaz where he became king in 1926, and the subsequent establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932. Both Ataturk and Ibn Saud had their admirers and none were friends to the Sufis. Among Ibn Saud's most ardent supporters and one who shared his suspicions of Sufism was Rashid Rida (1865-1935), a close associate of Muhammad 'Abduh and a man of immense personal influence in spreading the *salafi* reformists' message across the *umma* as far as South East Asia. He was an important influence also on Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), himself a Sufi, but famously the founder, in 1928, of the Muslim Brotherhood, which would become the strongest of Islamist organisations in the 1950s and 1960s and, in general, virulently opposed to Sufism.

The exposure to all these powerful challenges is usually seen as sufficient explanation for a weakened Middle Eastern Sufism as the twentieth century wore on. However, an interesting alternative explanation has been offered by Charles Lindholm in comparing the state of Sufism in South Asia with that in the Middle East. He suggests that the primary cause of the Sufis losing their importance in Middle Eastern society may be due to 'the compulsive tendency of Sufi sects to exaggerate the powers of their founders, which led them to set themselves at irreconcilable odds with the ascetic and egalitarian principles that animate Middle Eastern society'. By contrast, in South Asia, Sufis and their brotherhoods were to remain strong and even to gain in strength throughout the century, despite a long-established and outspoken opposition from conservative reformers, liberal thinkers and Islamists. While Lindholm notes the ability of Sufis to maintain a greater degree of autonomy and wealth, both pre- and post-independence from the British, he also remarks on the ways in which they served to provide a sense of moral security in the face of a corrupt political order and the constant threat of being overwhelmed by Hindu neighbours. Finally, he concludes that, most importantly, the authority of the Sufi pirs has found ready acceptance in a culture favourable to traditions of a sacred hierarchy, in which 'saintly, world-renouncing figures of superhuman purity and universal love' occupy a pivotal position.

Perhaps this analysis is truer for South Asia than for the Middle East. Sufism does indeed seem to have fitted very well into the South Asian cultural context; but, it might be asked if one of Sufism's great strengths, that has enabled it to survive, has not been its very flexibility in adapting to different environments, yet retaining a core of perennial values and goals. Thus it could satisfy the needs of an ascetic and egalitarian society, if that of the twentieth-century Middle East were to be identified as such (which is by no means certain). Conversely, it could also flourish in societies which set little store by asceticism, as could be noted in some of the African brotherhoods, and in those with a strong anti-egalitarian heritage, as in India.

By the 1980s and 1990s the *tariqas* were continuing to defy mid-century predictions of their demise in the face of competition from more up-to-date forms of religious association, such as the burgeoning Islamist organisations and new religious political parties. In some countries, for example in Egypt, where collapse had been confidently anticipated, *tariqas* were actively fighting back, regaining lost ground and even expanding. One who viewed this with dismay was the Egyptian radical Islamist 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman of Egyptian Jihad, currently in jail in the USA for terrorist activities including the 1993 attempt to bomb the World Trade Center in New York. Seeing himself as a defender of orthodoxy, he railed against the Sufis as 'an innovation', arguing that their 'superstitious practices' constitute unbelief. The brotherhoods' existence was symptomatic of Muslim decline and lack of true religion, which he perceived to be increasing, declaring: 'The more the Muslims decline and their faith weakens, the more numerous become these Orders, superstitions, and humbug (*shaw'adhat*) in the religion of God.' For those who shared 'Umar 'Abd al-

Rahman's opinion of Sufism the situation in Egypt was little short of disastrous, since by 1990 there were seventy-three officially recognised brotherhoods as well as around fifty that did not qualify for recognition.

Naturally, there were obvious variations throughout the century in the fluctuations of Sufi fortunes between regions and countries. Whereas Egypt and parts of the Middle East saw Sufi thought dominant in 1900, then witnessing decline before a late revival and South Asia experienced constant Sufi success despite challenges, there were areas which followed neither pattern. For example, in most of Sub-Saharan Africa until late in the twentieth century, to think about Islam was to think about Sufi interpretations of it. In the case of Nigeria, where Sufis faced some of their fiercest opposition, it was principally from the 1970s that the ideas of the powerful Tijani and Qadiri brotherhoods were seriously called into question by Islamists, especially those of the Yan Izala movement (founded 1978) and its leader Abubakar Gumi (1924-1992). In marked contrast, in North America and Western Europe both old-established *tariqas* and new groups developed and expanded their membership in the later part of the century, drawing on converts as well as members of Muslim communities settling in the West.

Preserving the Sufi Tradition

Understandably, many leading Sufi thinkers were to focus a major part of their efforts on working to preserve for their own and later generations what they saw as valuable in the Sufi tradition. At the same time they aimed to exclude perceived undesirable aspects tarnishing the pure faith and fought an ongoing battle of words with critics. Some of the fiercest controversies took place in the Indian subcontinent, which, in the late nineteenth century, had become an arena of intense debates among ulama concerned with maintaining the spirituality and moral integrity of their communities under British rule. Movements of renewal had formed around groups of like-minded scholars, who held sharply differing views from other groups of what might constitute 'true' Sufism, if indeed it existed.

One of the earliest important centres was at Deoband, about ninety miles to the north of Delhi, where a body of conservative reformers had founded their own famous school in 1868. There they frequently combined the roles of teachers and spiritual directors (pirs) for their student disciples (*murids*), training them using the approaches of whichever of the major *tariqas* they judged most suited to the individual concerned. The Sufism that they set out to preserve was of an austere nature, stripped of all the accretions of custom associated with the veneration of the Prophet and the cults of saints. Their aim of rooting out unacceptable innovations was expressed through the publication of fatwas and in debate with ulama of different persuasions; the most prominent of these from the 1880s through the twentieth century were from the movement of Ahl-i Sunnat wa Jama'at, commonly known as Barelwis after the key figure in developing the movement's ideas, Sayyid Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi (1856-1921).

The Barelwis are, above all, noted for their ardent defence of the shrine-centred Sufism of India with much, but not all, its wealth of local cultural acquisitions. This has led to a widespread perception of Barelwis as representing all unreformed Sufis in the subcontinent and having a particularly close connection with an uneducated rural population. However, despite the desire of Barelwi leaders to speak for a much wider range of South Asian Muslims than the members of Ahl-i Sunnat, the mass of worshippers at the shrines have not generally associated themselves with the movement.

Ahmad Riza Khan had been admired by his followers for his extraordinary academic abilities from early childhood, reading the Qur'an at the age of four and writing fatwas from the age of fourteen. It would be through his fatwas that he would deliver his principal opinions on Sufi topics. The year 1900 marked a critical point in Ahmad Riza's achieving general recognition for his leadership role, since it was then at a gathering of Barelwi ulama in Patna that he was declared to be the renewer of the faith (*mujaddid*) of the fourteenth Islamic century. International recognition came on his second ha] in 1905-6, when he was treated as an honoured scholar by the ulama of Mecca and Medina; but for him the highest spiritual validation was granted through a waking vision of the Prophet at his tomb during a month spent in Medina. In the last years before his death in 1921 he was treated like royalty when he travelled within India.

Even though he was anxious to promote the religion of the shrines, Ahmad Riza was also a strong supporter of the sharia. He had no regard for those who held that spiritual advancement could be achieved without a need to perform prescribed religious duties. Such 'false' Sufis were, in his opinion, 'inspired by Satan'. This strict view of the necessity of both sharia and *tariqa* places him in a line of mainstream Sufi thought, but also means that he cannot accept every manifestation of Sufism current in early twentieth-century India. The stress on observing the Law is an aspect of his deep devotion to the Prophet, which demands that he follow the Sunna in every detail. For Ahmad Riza, the Prophet Muhammad is higher than every other prophet, as he writes: 'Only the Prophet can reach God without intermediaries.' He is created by God of His

Light before all things and the World is created for his sake. He is the man of light without shadow and other prophets are his shadows. Such an exalted conception of the Prophet led the Barelwis to make his birthday (*milad*) on 12 Rabi' al-Awwal into a major occasion for celebration. Some of their most heated arguments with the Deobandis concerned their belief that he had been given knowledge of the Unseen, otherwise known only to God, and that he would be spiritually present with the worshippers who stood in his honour to hear blessings called down upon him.

These controversies over the Prophet's qualities, as well as over Barelwi support for the commemoration of saints' death days and the importance of seeking their intercession with God, continue to the present. In the second half of the century the disputes also surfaced in South Asian Muslim communities in diaspora, notably in Britain, where the Barelwis and Deobandis constitute the two largest movements.

In the Arab lands of the early twentieth century, Sufi writers found their position seriously weakened after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in July 1908 and the subsequent deposition of their greatest supporter, Sultan 'Abd al-Hamid II, in April 1909. Among the leading figures affected by these events was Shaykh Yusuf al-Nabahani (1849-1932), who lost his post as chief judge of the criminal court in Beirut after twenty years' service. He took refuge in the more hospitable atmosphere of Medina, a number of whose ulama being those who had welcomed Ahmad Riza Khan on his hajj a few years earlier. Enemies among the salafi reformists of Syria were glad to see him lose office. In May 1909 one, Jamal al-din al-Qasimi, wrote: 'As for al-Nabahani, let him die in his rage, may God fight such a superstitious man who does harm to many simpletons with his writings ... [A] sign of this age is rejecting writings such as his, barren of knowledge and culture.'

Whether he was indeed 'barren of knowledge and culture' is a matter of debate. Nabahani, to his admirers, was an accomplished poet who, like Ahmad Riza Khan, spent much effort in writing devotional poetry on the Prophet and in promoting the traditional Islamic knowledge and culture of his home region. In addition to his own thousands of verses eulogising the Prophet's spiritual qualities and miracles, he also dedicated much of his life to gathering a huge corpus of pious adulatory literature on the same theme. He was also the author of a renowned collection of biographies of 'God's friends', recounting their saintly miracles.

Nabahani was also strongly committed to the defence of the Sufi intellectual heritage, especially the ideas of Ibn 'Arabi on existential monism (*wahdat al-wujud*). He also, like the Barelwis, championed much Sufi ritual practice, such as seeking the intercession of saints during visitation to their tombs. However, in order to defend his beliefs, he launched vicious verbal attacks on those he saw as working to destroy the true faith, particularly the Wahhabis and the reformists Afghani, 'Abduh and Rida, all of whom he had personally encountered, and detested. In his old age, after the First World War, he returned to his native village of Ijzim near Haifa in Palestine, where he died in 1932.

Although Nabahani was a prolific author and his works well known in Sufi circles, he appears a somewhat isolated and old-fashioned figure by the 1920s and 1930s, when the old orthodoxies of the Ottoman establishment were being swept away by the tide of reformism and nationalism. A younger contemporary, the Algerian shaykh Ahmad al- 'Alawi (1869-1934), was far more successful in convincing a wide following of the timeless values of the Sufi tradition. Within Algeria itself he drew thousands to be initiated into his 'Alawi *tariqa*, derived from the Darqawiyya, itself an offshoot of the major North African brotherhood of the Shadhiliyya. He also exerted a considerable fascination for those Europeans who came into contact with him. Frithjof Schuon recalled a few months after his death: 'To meet such a one is like coming face to face, in mid-twentieth century, with a medieval Saint or a Semitic Patriarch.' Schuon offers a sense of the inner, as well as the outer, man in his description:

> In his brown *jallabah* and white turban, with his silver-grey beard and his long hands which seemed when he moved them to be weighed down by the flow of his *barakah* (blessing), he exhaled something of the pure archaic ambiance of Sayyidna Ibrahim al-Khalil [Abraham]. He spoke in a subdued, gentle voice, a voice of splintered crystal from which, fragment by fragment, he let fall his words ... His eyes, which were like two sepu1chrallamps, seemed to pierce through all objects, seeing in their outer shell merely one and the same nothingness, beyond which they saw always one and the same reality - the Infinite. (*A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century: Shaikh Ahmad al-'Alawi, his Spiritual Heritage and Legacy*, pg. 116)

Ahmad al-'Alawi had little formal education and yet there is evidence of a formidable intellect at work, combined with mystical inspiration, in his meditations on the Qur'an and in his spiritual poetry published after the First World War. Poetically, probably the strongest influence on him came from the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Farid (d. 1235), whose beautiful odes were regularly chanted by the shaykh's *murids*. Otherwise, apart from the thought of Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), so pervasive in later Sufism, 'Alawi had studied the work of later writers, such as 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1408) on the Perfect Man, Ibn 'Ashur (d. 1631), author of a

treatise that was required reading for Darqawis, and 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi (d. 1731), the great Sufi of Damascus. Some of 'Alawi's writings remained unpublished, notably a Qur'anic commentary of both exoteric and esoteric exegesis up to the fortieth verse of Surat al-Baqara and a book of cosmology. Among his publications an interesting early treatise is The *Unique Archetype* written about 1910 on the symbolism of letters of the Arabic alphabet.

However, 'Alawi was not only conscious of a need to preserve traditional Sufi thought, but also to speak and write in its defence. He perceived the salafi reformists as posing a serious threat to the very survival of Islam as he conceived it and, from 1920 until his death in 1934, he laboured to combat their criticisms. He was particularly concerned with upholding the good reputation of Sufis and explaining the Sufi perspective on controversial issues. For example, on the question of visiting tombs, he maintained the validity of seeking the intercession of the holy dead, since many Muslims feel they have not reached a sufficiently high spiritual level to be able to dispense with mediators between them and God. He is responding here to a critic from Tunis, who has used a quotation from Ibn 'Arabi to the effect that a dead man cannot help the living. 'Alawi explains that this does not refer to the practice of intercession, but of seeking guidance on the Path, and he asserts his own view that it is indeed necessary to receive training from a living shaykh. In taking this position, he is actually going against the beliefs of those Sufis, including Nabulusi, who held that dead masters might also guide.

'Alawi argued that the reformists were harming Islam with their attacks on Sufis, when westernisation in Muslim societies was a more fitting target for their attacks. He was opposed to the spreading adoption of Western ways, including dress, being concerned about the power of clothing to corrupt the soul. His essentially conservative viewpoint, lamenting a decline in spirituality in both his own and Western society, gave his teachings considerable appeal to European converts as well as North African Muslims troubled by modern threats to their way of life.

Adaptation within *tariqas*

Defence of tradition by Sufi thinkers would become increasingly robust in the later twentieth century. However, it would also frequently be linked with a consciousness of needing to help *tariqas* adapt to new circumstances and compete with the attractions of anti-Sufi movements and organisations and the continuing invasion of Western ideology. Adaptation could take a variety of forms. Some of its advocates would present themselves as reformers anxious to rid Sufism of unworthy corruptions; others would be concerned with making their message more acceptable in post-colonial conditions or allowing scope for converts to adjust to the faith.

Egypt constituted one of the most important arenas for debate about Sufi reform. This was partly because it had a particularly varied range of Sufi perspectives, represented both by the seventy-three *tariqas* registered with the Supreme Council of Sufi Orders and other unregistered *tariqas*, such as the large Burhaniyya brotherhood with over three million members. Its importance was also due to Egypt's centrality in the development of reformist and Islamist critiques of Sufism, as well as its established intellectual influence in the umma. Active reforming tendencies are especially noticeable among branches and offshoots of the Shadhiliyya from the 1930s onwards, reaching greater heights of intensity in the 1970s to 1990s.

Western scholarly attention was drawn to the Hamidiyya Shadhiliyya by the work of Michael Gilsenan, who studied the brotherhood in the 1960s and 1970s. Its founding shaykh was Salama Hasan al-Radi (1867-1939), a civil servant with a bureaucratic mind but also a miracle-working ascetic devoted, in the 1930s, to the welfare of the poor. Radi set out his rules, known as *The Laws*, for establishing a reformed, theologically sound and sharia-observant body of murids. They would be marked by their orderliness and sobriety and the readiness of officials in the *tariqa* to control any sign of excessive emotionalism in *dhikr*. In effect, the mystical aspects and much popular ritual seem to have been de-emphasised so that there was little to distinguish the membership from that of any pious, welfare association.

A similar approach to reform was to be adopted by another Shadhili branch, the Muhammadiyya Shadhiliyya and its affiliated body of non-initiated men and women, the 'Ashira al-Muhammadiyya, also dating from the 1930s. Its founder, Muhammad Zaki Ibrahim, had an Azhar education and became noted as a poet and prolific writer on Sufi affairs. He has also been perceived as an establishment figure, a member of the Higher Religious Committee and the Sufi Supreme Council, honoured by Presidents Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak, and yet an independent thinker ready to speak out on core issues of Sufi concern and to campaign for reform.

Like Radi and the Hamidi Shadhilis, Ibrahim stressed obedience to sharia in an organised, socially

responsible manner with the suppression of wild forms of *dhikr*, music, dance and the mixing of men and women, especially at the great *mawlid* celebrations of saints' true 'birthdays' (after their death to the earthly life). The *mawlids* were a perennial target of criticism in Egypt as occasions for immoral and lewd behaviour and it was these aspects to which Ibrahim, in common with other Sufi reformers, was opposed, while advocating a purified, spiritual participation in *mawlids* rather than the ban called for by some Islamists. Women of the 'Ashira, catered for in their own separate section, were discouraged from simply gathering at some of the most popular shrines, such as that of Sayyida Zaynab in Cairo, and exhorted instead to model their lives on those of such saintly women exemplars.

Among Shaykh Ibrahim's most widely read works is one entitled *The Alphabet of Islamic Sufism*, in which he answers fifty-four key questions posed by Egyptian journalists. Although this appears as an attempt to respond to common criticisms of Sufism, the 'Ashira's Editorial Committee assert that it would be a useless task to try to dissuade opponents from their attacks. 'Rather, the aim is to fortify those who have not been afflicted with their disease and to identify those who have been deceived by their confusion.' A principal topic addressed is whether Sufism is truly Islamic in its origin or whether it owes its origins to non-Islamic sources such as Buddhism and Christian monasticism. Ibrahim insists on Sufism's Islamic credentials and that its aim is to seek human perfection, an essential Islamic duty. Questioned about philosophical Sufis, he does not set out to defend them, but to deflect attention away from them by claiming that they are very few in number, their writings are no longer relevant, rarely read and even unavailable. Therefore, they should be left alone. Instead, all Muslims should concentrate on pursuing true Sufism in conformity with the Qur'an and Sunna and working to eradicate the social ills of the day.

By contrast, the most prominent Shadhili intellectual of late twentieth-century Egypt, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud, Rector of al-Azhar from 1973 to 1978, was strongly opposed to this kind of anti-intellectualism. While also supporting the importance of active social involvement to help overcome contemporary problems, he did not see this as an alternative to studying the work of great Sufi intellectuals of the past. On the contrary, Mahmud held that there was considerable benefit to be gained from such as Ibn 'Arabi in moulding a spiritual and intellectual elite who would revivify true Sufism. In his opinion, it was a mistake to label al-Ghazali as the acceptable, orthodox face of Sufism and Ibn 'Arabi as its unacceptable, heterodox face; he stressed the connections and essential consistency between the two. Given his impeccable credentials in the eyes of those lobbying for a strict implementation of sharia in Egypt, 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud was a powerful champion for the Great Shaykh.

Yet, despite his image as a stern and austere intellectual, Mahmud did not confine his instruction to academic students, but included those whom he regarded as part of the potential spiritual elite, even if they were illiterate. One such illiterate shaykh claimed to have been guided on the Way by Mahmud and by his visions of the long-dead founding figure of the Shadhiliyya, Abu al-Hasan al-Shadhili. In the 1980s he considered his oath to the thirteenth-century al-Shadhili far more important than what was for him a routine oath to a living shaykh.

Similar convictions of belonging to a spiritual elite, even if illiterate, have been a hallmark of the Tijaniyya since its foundation by Ahmad al-Tijani in eighteenth-century North Africa. However, for the Tijanis the whole brotherhood constituted this elite, superior to other Sufis and Muslims in general. In the twentieth century the *tariqa* would become spectacularly successful, especially in West Africa, but it would also face divisions and fierce confrontations with other Sufis, particularly Qadiris, and anti-Sufi Wahhabis. The brotherhood was noted for its extravagant claims that Ahmad al-Tijani was, like Ibn 'Arabi, the Seal of Muhammad-like Sainthood, the pole of mystical poles (*qutb al-aqtab*), had been taught special prayers directly by the Prophet in a vision and granted permission from God to admit all his followers to Paradise regardless of whatever sins they had committed. Critics were further shocked by Tijani assertions that they were actually in reception of the beatific vision of God Himself (*ru'yat Allah*), the mainstream Islamic belief being that only the Prophet could have such a vision in this life. How Tijanis conceive of being able to see God appears to be related to their beliefs in the 'overflowing' (*jayd*) of the divine into the creation, as passed to them by Ahmad al-Tijani in a simplified form of the ideas of Ibn 'Arabi and other medieval Sufi thinkers. What they would claim to see is, therefore, this all-pervading divine presence in the world, supremely manifested in Prophet Muhammad as the perfect human; Tijanis would believe the Prophet to be with them in body and spirit at their Friday afternoon group recital of the prayer of blessings upon him, *The Jewel of Perfection*. Consequently, they lay out a white cloth for the Prophet in their midst.

While the Tijaniyya split into different branches, the most significant doctrinal adaptation in the twentieth century was that initiated by the Senegalese shaykh Ibrahim Niass (1900-1975). He first developed his new model of Tijanism in Senegal around 1930, but was far more successful in spreading it outside his home country, notably when he introduced his ideas into northern Nigeria in the 1950s. The Niassian Tijanis

numbered several million by late in the century and described themselves as Jama'at al-Faydat al-Tijaniyya (the Community of the Tijani Overflowing) commonly known in Hausa as Faila.

Ibrahim Niass understood himself to occupy a very special and exalted position in the Tijani hierarchy, but it was one that would extend great advantages to those who joined his new community. In 1930 he put forward the claim to be the 'saviour of the age' (*ghawth al-zaman*). He also believed that he had received from Ahmad al-Tijani the divine overflowing and the Greatest Secret, marking him out as specially favoured by God with mystical knowledge. However, he held that this 'secret' and 'overflowing' were not for him alone, but could be transmitted to his community through training which must not be divulged to anyone outside the initiated group. In the final stage of the training, some Tijanis claim, the secret is divulged to them that Ibrahim Niass is effectively one with Prophet Muhammad and Ahmad al-Tijani. Probably a major part of the appeal of Ni ass's teaching was the assurance that followers belonged to a privileged elite, enjoying God's favour in this world, where they were told they would prosper even in times of general hardship, as well as in the Afterlife, where Paradise was a certainty. Although the Tijaniyya as a whole was immensely successful in adapting to twentieth-century African conditions, it also won more enemies than any other *tariqa* in the region and for many Wahhabi critics became synonymous with the perceived evils of Sufism.

Outside Africa, the Tijaniyya spread briefly on a small scale to Turkey in the 1950s, where it was quickly suppressed. It found more fertile ground for propagation in Indonesia from the 1920s and 1930s, angering the well-established major brotherhoods of the Naqshabandiyya and Qadiriyya. By 1957 these *tariqas*, together with the Shadhiliyya, formed an umbrella organisation. The Tijaniyya, being regarded as not sufficiently orthodox and sharia-conscious, was excluded. In the 1980s simmering disputes flared up once again, apparently because of other Sufis' dislike of what they felt to be Tijani spiritual arrogance in laying claim to superior status and because of the Tijanis' aggressive methods of proselytisation.

Despite concerns about the poaching of *murids* by Tijanis, it was actually the Naqshabandiyya that emerged as the most entrenched and adaptable *tariqa* in modern Indonesia. In the early twentieth century it was represented by the stern reformist Khalidi branch imported in the mid-nineteenth century from the Ottoman Empire, but was also present in an eclectic and combined form, merged with the Qadiriyya and known as the Qadiriyya wa-Naqshabandiyya founded by an Indonesian shaykh resident in Mecca. However, arguably the most successful local adaptation of the *tariqa* in the mid-twentieth century came about through the work of a modern-educated teacher, Jalal al-Din of Bukittinggi (d. 1976). From about 1940 he was a prolific producer of books and pamphlets offering instruction in the Naqshabandiyya, although these were much criticised by more traditional Naqshabandis, who questioned his knowledge and pointed to numerous errors. Jalal al-Din's practice of initiation is notably unconventional, involving a symbolic death and rebirth, in which the *murid* 'is covered with a shroud and must imagine that he is dead and buried, and he is put to sleep in the position of the grave. 'While asleep he should have one of twenty possible dreams or visions.' The procedure would be repeated, if necessary, until the desired dream occurred and this would be followed the next day by a meeting for instruction with the master.

From 1945 Jalal al-Din became actively involved in politics, forming his own religious party and militia before entering parliament in the mid-1950s. He was a devoted supporter of Sukarno, labelling his political programme the Sukarno Tariqa. Nevertheless, in spite of Jalal al-Din's dubious ability to play politics with the Way, the influence of his teaching sank into rapid decline after his death in 1976.

New Mystical Directions

Some of the most radical attempts to reconstruct Sufi thought took place outside the *tariqas*. In certain instances, these were cases where an individual Muslim thinker with a modern education, but an interest in Sufi ideas or even a Sufi affiliation, sought to think through his own understanding of Islam for the twentieth century and drew to some extent on a base of Sufi ideas. The result could be a metamorphosis of traditional Sufi thought into a new construction that was not readily recognisable or, indeed, acceptable to adherents of mainstream Sufism.

Perhaps the most celebrated of such figures was the Indian philosopher-poet Muhammad Iqbal (1873-1938), who combined philosophical Sufism and modern European philosophy in an adventurous and original effort to address the problems of Muslim adjustment to modernity. Iqbal had already received an Islamic and Western-style education in Lahore and shown his poetic and philosophical talents, before his move in 1905 to study philosophy at Trinity College, Cambridge. He went on to further advanced studies in Germany, where he presented a doctoral thesis at Munich on *The Development of Metaphysics in Persia*. This was to be a groundbreaking work for scholarship on Persian Sufism, drawing attention to important

contributors to the Sufi intellectual tradition, including Suhrawardi al-Maqtul, Jili and Mulla Sadra, scarcely known in the West at the time. Iqbal's admiration for the mystics in this early period of his career was to oscillate later between love and loathing. While at times he valued the great spiritual qualities of particular early and medieval Sufis, at times he abhorred the effects of obscurantist thought on later generations and the retreat from facing everyday realities. He complained bitterly of his Sufi contemporaries that 'owing to their ignorance of the modern mind' they had 'become absolutely incapable of receiving any inspiration from modern thought and experience'.

Yet, if Iqbal was ambivalent in his attitude to Sufism, the same ambivalence is to be detected in his view of some of the 'modern thought' that inspired him. He was fascinated by European philosophical irrationalism, especially that of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Bergson. For one educated in a Sufi tradition, the irrationalists' rejection of totally rational and scientific interpretations of life had a clear appeal. But he realised that there would also be a conflict between his values as a Muslim and the moral outlook of some philosophers. Notably, Nietzsche's concept of the Superman, the superior fortified being with a relentless will to power, conflicted with his own perception of the central role of love and compassion in the perfected human being. Yet he believed that there could be benefits for Muslims in taking the best elements of each to encourage the development of a strong, but spiritual and caring, personality. In a Persian poem of 1915, *Secrets of the Self*, he writes of this new hybrid self, a cross between Superman and Perfect Man, who will become God's true vicegerent on earth. Far from pursuing the Sufi goal of weakening the desires of the human self until it is completely replaced with God-like qualities and annihilated in *fana'*, Iqbal proposes the strengthening of the self through desire. His ultimate aim was to overcome Muslim weakness by encouraging the building of strong human egos to form a powerful, assertive Muslim nation. By later generations he would be remembered and honoured as the inspirer of Muslim nationalism that would lead, after his death, to the 1947 creation of the state of Pakistan.

Iqbal's vision of the powerful, life-affirming self would exert its influence among opinion-makers of South Asia. Abul al-A'la Mawdudi (1903-1979), founder of the Jama'at-i Islami movement, was a working associate of Iqbal and himself well-educated in Sufi theosophy and poetry. Like Iqbal, he was critical of Sufis who retreated from the world and stressed the need for committed, social activism rather than the self-destruction of *fana'*. Similarly, in Shi'i circles, another enthusiastic admirer of Iqbal was the radical activist 'Ali Shari'ati (1933-1977), who was generally negative towards Sufism, but advocated his own socially responsible style of Islamic mysticism.

Some other efforts at radical rethinking would lead to the creation of new Islamic movements and organisations with their roots in Sufism. In Turkey, new groups arose out of the Naqshabandiyya, one of the most successful being that of the Nurcus, founded by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960). Nursi was interested in interpreting the Qur'an in the light of modern science and his work in this direction is entitled *The Epistle of Light* (*Risale-i Nur*), hence the name of Nurcus for his followers. However, espousal of modernity did not mean acceptance of the Turkish secular republic.

A branch of the Nurcus that attracted considerable publicity in the 1970s to 1990s was that of the Fethullahis, named after its leading figure Fethullah Gulen. Gulen's ideas were to harness the movement to the cause of Turkish nationalism, promoting a specifically Turkish Islam, while at the same time seeking closer ties with the European Union. A more radical mystical group emerging in the 1990s was the Aczmenci, that arose out of the Nurcus in eastern Turkey, but separated from them. This group was accused of involvement in the murder of secularists and its leaders were exposed on television in 1995-1996 for allegedly tricking young girls into sexual relations with them as a way of supposedly drawing nearer to God.

It is perhaps understandable that Turkey should have become such a locus of new religious movements, given its heavy exposure to secularisation and the suppression of a mainstream role for the traditional *tariqas*. Yet, outside Turkey, especially in North America and Western Europe, there was a significant input of Turkish Sufi thought into both regular brotherhoods active in the West and neo-Sufi organisations. The Naqshabandiyya-Haqqaniyya led by a Turkish Cypriot shaykh, Nazim al-Qubrusi (b. 1922), was one regular *tariqa* that would attract members both among immigrant Muslim communities and European and American converts. Shaykh Nazim records himself how his new *tariqa* section expanded after his first visit to London:

> I came here first in 1974 and I could never find a place to pray *jum'ah* in the Turkish or Cypriot community. I prayed in the east London mosque, which was in a small house ... that first year I prayed in Kilburn with 40 English Muslims, *taraiveha* prayer. (**Muslim News**)

By the 1990s more than 3,000 worshippers would attend Ramadan prayers with Shaykh Nazim and his followers had grown in numbers globally, especially in the USA, and included many African-Americans. He is noted as valuing highly these African-American *murids*, saying that they 'are very spiritually powerful and ... that the Mahdi awaited by Muslims will be of African descent and will be wearing a red turban'. While the practices of the brotherhood were, on the whole, standard Naqshabandi, the different ethnic origins of the members were identified by different colour turbans and there was a certain relaxation of rules for the new converts.

Other *tariqas* were successful in spreading traditional or adapted Sufi teachings in the West in the second half of the twentieth century, but more controversial were the many groups with relatively loose connections to established Islamic Sufism. Such groups have frequently been described as 'neo-Sufi', although critics would label them as 'pseudo-Sufi'. There was considerable variety, but it would not be unusual for the membership to include a number of people who did not and were not expected to convert to Islam. In some cases, the whole group would consist of non-Muslim Westerners.

The origins of these movements were often regularly Islamic Sufi, one example being that of the Helveti-Jerrahis, brought from Istanbul to the USA around 1980 by Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak (1916-1986). The order was subsequently developed by an American teacher Lex Hixon (1941-1995) in quite unorthodox and eclectic directions, since Hixon was also a prominent figure in other non-Islamic movements. Observers noted that he was an 'orthodox priest on Monday, a Buddhist lama on Tuesday' and 'Christian among the Christians, Muslim among the Muslims', However not everyone in the order accepted such an obvious break with tradition. Also from a Turkish origin and giving rise to more unorthodox tendencies were several supposedly Mevlevi organisations, acknowledging the great popularity of Rumi's poetry in the West and of the celebrated Mevlevi dance.

By far the best-known and most often criticised of neo-Sufis was Idries Shah (1924-1996), prolific author of popular books and founder of the Society for Sufi Studies. Shah claimed that Sufism was a form of universal wisdom and not Islamic, since it existed from before the historical development of Islam. It was not static in nature and could not be understood by studying past manifestations and methods of old masters. It needed to be constantly redefined for new circumstances and new environments. Consequently, he displayed a general disregard for academic descriptions of Sufism and believed that an obsession with its traditional forms might actually prevent the seeker from recognising the real thing. He expresses this succinctly: 'Show a man too many camel's bones, or show them to him too often, and he will not be able to recognise a camel when he comes across a real one'.

Shah's methods for training Western followers to recognise the 'real camel' seem to have had little in common with traditional methods, but appear to owe something to the spiritual training system of the philosophical occultist George Gurdjieff (c. 1866-1949) and his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Mankind. Shah groups apparently met for study sessions to discuss Sufi teaching stories and engage in exercises to heighten personal spiritual awareness. Shah was the supreme populariser of Sufism for Western consumption, but James Moore was to point eloquently to the dangers: 'that his is a "Sufism" without self-sacrifice, without self-transcendence, without the aspiration of gnosis, without tradition, without the Prophet, without the Qur'an, without Islam, and without God. Merely that.'

These are damning words indeed and may serve as a chilling reminder that Sufism's friends, as well as its enemies, had some concerns about certain directions it was taking in the late twentieth century. Flexibility and adaptability enabled Sufi ideas to be transmitted to new audiences and break free from being labelled as the preserve of old-fashioned Muslim traditionalists. Ever wider access was granted to esoteric Sufi teaching, both mainstream Islamic and New Age, beyond the confines of carefully prepared and initiated murids. By the 1990s any interested seeker, or simply the curious, could learn about supposed Sufi mysteries via a range of popular books and magazines, film and music recordings and through the great explosion of information on the World Wide Web. Some groups, such as the Naqshabandi-Haqqanis, showed extraordinary readiness to disclose detailed information on what would normally in the past have been considered knowledge to be kept hidden from outside view. The result was that Sufi thought, in all its twentieth-century variations, was increasingly exposed, publicly attacked and defended on an unprecedented scale. The test of the twenty-first century will be whether traditional, adapted or radically reconstructed Sufi ideas can survive such massive exposure.