

Watch Out, Sufism is Back

by Colin Bearup

Sufism, once dismissed as doomed to fade away, is reviving and playing an increasing role in 21st century Islam. The resurgence is particularly visible in the West, but it's a global phenomenon changing the context in which Christian mission operates.

Sufism in New Soil

"My spiritual guide is Sheikh Siddiqui," said Shabza. I was sitting at a community event in a British mosque talking to a young Muslim woman, aged about 30, smartly but conservatively dressed. She was there with fellow school teachers, half of whom, like her, were of Pakistani heritage. The others were white English. As a student of current developments among Sufis in the West, I knew exactly what she was talking about. Pir Abdul Wahab Siddiqui, a member of the Hijazi order of the Naqshbandiya, arrived in the UK in 1972 from Pakistan and built a following among the Asian settlers in Coventry.¹ His movement built the very first Sufi tomb on British soil and he is now buried there.

Siddiqui's plan was not simply to replicate the tomb cults of Pakistan. He was deeply aware that for Islam to really take root in the UK it would require a credibility beyond ethnic boundaries and with those who have passed through higher education. He had not only trained his four sons in Islam and Sufism, but he also put them through secular universities. While the mortal remains of other Muslim leaders had traditionally been repatriated to Pakistan, he intentionally prepared a tomb for himself in Nuneaton, England, where he was eventually buried in 1994.² His sons carry on his work today. This group therefore has the distinction of having the first Sufi tomb in the UK and the first *sajjada nashin* (saintly family) born and educated in Britain.

Siddiqui's vision was for a Muslim community in the UK led by university-educated Islamic scholars, fully instructed both in *shari'a* (Islamic law) and in Sufism. This would give them authority to address the challenges of life in Britain as authentically British Muslims. In 1982, he set up the first British

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pro-Sufi Islamic theological seminary.³ Here, in contrast to many traditional institutions, the diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices would be explored. He went on to found a college that combined secular academic subjects with traditional Islamic subjects.⁴ His vision was ultimately to found a university teaching both secular and religious subjects. The university was opened after his death.⁵ The project continues, and the first functioning shari'a council started operations at the college in the mid-2000s.⁶

The Significance for Today and Tomorrow

What has all this to do with us? Prominent Muslim scholar and thinker, Dr. Tariq Ramadan wrote:

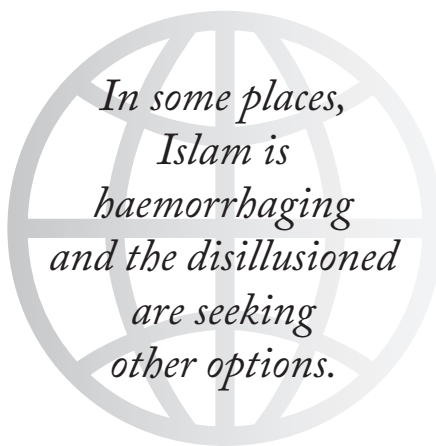
Western Muslims will play a decisive role in the evolution of Islam worldwide because of the nature and complexity of the challenges they face.⁷

In a day of extraordinary global communication networks and the rise of modern cities throughout the Muslim world, the pioneering developments led by Muslims in the West are likely to have greater significance all around the world.

Most Christian writers have little to say about Sufism. That magnificent tome, *Encountering the World of Islam (EWI)*, gives it only four pages and a few passing references.⁸ "Sufism," wrote Arberry in 1950, "has run its course."⁹ Trimingham concluded his detailed survey of the Sufi orders through the ages by saying "the orders are declining everywhere . . . less by defection than because the young have not been joining."¹⁰ Western scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries regarded Sufism as a hopelessly outdated phenomenon doomed to wither away, only temporarily sustained by the superstitious illiterate masses and the unscrupulous charlatans that exploited them. The conviction that the day of Sufism was well and truly over was not exclusive to Western observers. Major

Muslim thinkers such as Mawdudi, al-Banna and Qutb had also described much of what came under the label of Sufism as decadent, dated and doomed.¹¹ In Turkey, Ataturk saw the abolition of the Sufi orders as a necessary step to enabling Turkey to take its place in the modern world.¹²

For about 200 years now, anti-Sufi reformists have been a powerful voice in the Islamic world. Most Christian writings about Islam confine Sufism to a sidebar, an anomaly, to be mentioned in passing. However, Sufism still pervades the Muslim world. The most visible forms were at the populist and decadent end of the spectrum, but the sincere, scholarly, and dynamic



elements have always been present as well. Now the tide has turned. Sufi sheikhs are holding conferences attended by thousands in Western universities. International conventions around the world are bringing together Sufi leaders from many different countries. Western converts of the highest level of scholarship are translating ancient Sufi texts into English and making them accessible through English to Muslims around the world. The head of Islam's most prestigious university, Egyptian Ahmed el-Tayeb, is a Sufi.¹³ I was recently in Turkey and asked a friend what a student-aged young man would do if he decided to get serious about Islam. The answer was, "He would join a *tariqat*"—a Sufi order.

Knowing Islam

In some places, Islam is haemorrhaging and the disillusioned are seeking other options. Violent jihadists discredit the reformist/fundamentalist agenda again and again. One result we see is Muslims turning to Christ, and another is Muslims turning to atheism. Still another is the revival of a more spiritual Islam, Sufism. With all this turbulence, it might be argued that there is less need for Christians to possess a detailed knowledge of Islam. In recent years there has been a noticeable shift away from mastering Islamic thought with a view to refuting it. Much more emphasis has gone into better ways of presenting Christ and returning to basic discipleship practices. While there is much to be said for these better practices, Islam is not going away. It is adapting and a whole Sufi dimension is becoming prominent—a dimension with which Christians have historically never engaged.

It will always be the case that the more we understand where people are coming from, the better our communication will be. It is essential that we are able to gauge how our message is interpreted. Many of our workers base their understanding of Islam and Muslims on stereotypical models that are increasingly outdated. These days, with so much more Islamic activity conducted online and in English, we are able to learn a great deal about how Muslims understand the world they live in.

Love and Assurance

Consider this. There is a popular Sufi song¹⁴ that is going around the world. The first verse runs,

The love of Muhammad and his family/
Is my true religion my reason to be/
And if when I die my sins are too many/
The love of Muhammad will rescue me.

Among the first things I was told about Islam as a new worker is that Muslims have a religion but no saviour, that there is no love in Islam and that Islam is a religion of works

such that Muslims can have no assurance. The reality is actually much more complex, and we do ourselves no favour by dismissing the words of this hymn as some kind of obscure anomaly. It actually reflects ancient traditions now made accessible to us.

Sufism has many expressions and all are concerned with the interior life in addition to the exterior. Sufis assert that Islam consists of not only *iman*, the beliefs, and *deen*, the “Pillars,” the outward religious obligations, but also *ibsaan*, the perfection of faith.¹⁵ They assert it is possible to draw nearer to God through the application of disciplines and the tutelage of a master. They believe that a few attain such an exalted status that they become *awliya* (singular *wali*) usually translated saints, able to interact with the unseen world, to communicate with departed saints and with Muhammad himself. For them, Muhammad is not a mere mortal, dead and buried. Rather he existed as a created light before the rest of creation and is still present today. This makes for a living religion. While affirming that revelation has ceased, they claim that the revelation opened the door to live communication with the divine. A living Yemeni Sufi master with an international following, Sheikh Habib Umar bin Hafiz puts it this way:

Someone who does not know that Muhammad is alive is dead. When someone knows that Muhammad is alive his heart comes to life.¹⁶

His colleague Habib Ali al-Jifri declares: “The prophet is a means through which we connect to and come to know Allah.”¹⁷

Although Christian workers have generally been taught to agree with the Islamic fundamentalist view that such expressions of Islam are deviant and corrupt,¹⁸ there are serious Islamic scholars who see things quite differently. In the UK, the relentless accusations made by reformist Muslims that the traditional Sufi-type Islam of South Asia is hopelessly contaminated with

For them Muhammad is no mere mortal, but existed as a created light before creation and is still present today.

Hinduism and Occultism were rebutted with great effect in the mid-1990s by the emergence in the public sphere of Sheikhs Nuh Keller, Tim Winter and Hamza Yusuf. These three were all white Western converts to Islam, fluent in classical Arabic, who had been studying ancient Islamic texts in the Middle East and learning from Sufi masters in places like Morocco, Syria and Yemen. While by no means affirming every local practice found in folk Islam, they confirmed the Sufi worldview as authentic and defensible from ancient Arabic sources.¹⁹ In the last twenty years, a spectrum of leaders representing different expressions of Sufism around the globe, upholding high standards of scholarship and a conservative view of shari’a, have been collaborating to raise the credibility of Sufism under the banner of “Traditional Islam.”²⁰ Far from seeing themselves as some kind of aberration, they see themselves as the truly orthodox. As Sheikh Abdal Hakim Murad (birth name Tim Winter) puts it, “If all Muslims were Sufis, all people would be Muslim.”²¹

How Big a Footprint?

How extensive is Sufism? Such a question usually expects a statistical answer, but mere numbers will not help us. Secular academic Ron Geaves helpfully describes Sufi Islam as a set of concentric circles with saints (both living and dead) at the centre; committed disciples (*mureeds*) forming a small inner circle; people who believe in a saint but have not themselves set out on the Sufi path forming a much wider circle; and, then, the general public who share this worldview but are not affiliated. This latter broad fringe of affiliates may come to the saint or tomb in times of need or, nowadays, may consult Sufi sheikhs via online platforms. This outer circle can extend

across whole societies.²² There is really no clean line of demarcation between Sufi and non-Sufi. At any one time the number of recognised saints in the inner circles is very small, but the number of those committed to a Sufi understanding of the world is much greater. Furthermore, it is not possible to quantify the number of people who believe that Sufism is a valid worldview but who at the same time may hold conflicting views. Anthropologist Katherine Ewing’s interaction with highly educated secular Pakistanis is indicative. She documents how in both Pakistan and in the West, Muslims who could speak in a cool and dismissive way about Sufism in their professional context would suddenly change their demeanour when encountering the suggestion of an authentic spiritual experience.²³ All this is not to claim that Sufism is universally recognised as valid among Muslims; rather it is to affirm that Sufism is present in most contexts at least to some degree, and it is not possible to divide people simply into Sufi and non-Sufi.²⁴

Sufism and the Secular World

Siddiqui is not alone in seeking to integrate Sufi spirituality with secular education. The preoccupation with education and the necessity of uniting both scholarly and mystical Islam is also found in movements like Minhaj-ul-Quran International (MQI), founded by Dr. Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri. Now based in Canada, Qadri grew up in Pakistan, trained in Islamic law and became active in political life. He adopted the call to revival espoused by the reformist movements but retained a commitment to Sufi spirituality.²⁵ Initially he preferred to be known by the title of doctor or professor rather than the title *maulvi* traditionally accorded to Muslim clerics. This reflected

his zeal to embrace the modern world, especially education, in order to be relevant to the present and the future. He particularly saw the need for women to participate in education at all levels.²⁶

The organisation he founded in Lahore in 1981, MQI, now has branches in ninety countries.²⁷ Its structure bears no relation to a traditional Sufi order. It was set up as a modern-style mass movement with committees and membership fees. Rather than being focused exclusively on the inward pursuit of godliness, it is also active in welfare projects and education. Its premises are designated as *idaaras*, administrative centres, rather than Sufi lodges or mosques, and the leaders are called directors rather than imams. From the outset, MQI had special sections for youth and women.

MQI is very modern in organisational style but at the same time it supports the traditional Sufi cosmology (with hierarchies of saints and Muhammad as the physical manifestation of a primordial creative light, etc.) and seeks to promote it using modern imagery. For example, Qadri writes:

The source of spiritual bounties, kindness, compassion, love and affection is the holy personality of the most revered and exalted Messenger of Allah. To relay these vast blessings to all believers there are great conduits of Allah's friends who make up a spiritual power distribution system which works in a very similar way to electric power supply system... The *awliya* of Allah have vitalized and strengthened this "conduit system" by their connection with our beloved Prophet.²⁸

This one movement, described here in some detail, is not unique but rather indicative of new trends. The Turkish movement headed by Fethullah Gülen, for example, has much in common with MQI. Like MQI, it combines a focus on education and the modern world with Sufi-based Islamic values. It is said to run 1000 schools worldwide.²⁹

Implications for Ministry

Perry Pennington, writing of South Asian Muslims with a Sufi worldview,³⁰ pointed out that, in contrast to what we think of as orthodox Islam, these Muslims acknowledged their separation from God as being both real and needing to be addressed. Although their vocabulary is different to ours, their awareness that they are in need of salvation is not in doubt. Furthermore, the belief that it is God who provides a way of salvation and that it operates through holy human mediation is also explicitly taught. Having identified how South Asian Muslims perceived their need, Pennington examined the ways in which the scriptures speak to that need and



found that strands of the Gospel on which Westerners do not traditionally focus do indeed speak their language.

Sufi Islam sees God, humankind and the world differently to textbook Islam. For Sufis, our declaration that Jesus is alive and Muhammad is dead demonstrates our ignorance. They may well hear us say such things but choose not to argue. Sufism has its own style of spirituality. To put it more starkly, the manners associated with a person of spiritual credibility are different to what we might expect. In general, those steeped in Sufism avoid disputes. Western Christians have developed many strategies for those Muslims who use well organised verbal reasoning.

It may be that the reason Evangelicals have not developed the tools for communicating with Sufis is that Sufis usually avoid debate and so we fail to hear their voice.

Those with a Sufi outlook prize peace and gentleness in speech. Qadri says, "Allah likes those who are soft-spoken. Speaking in a soft tone has been termed the best donation."³¹ They use proverbs and parables. They feel no compulsion to make every statement explicit. In mission circles of late, there has been a greater appreciation of the importance of narrative and indirect communication. We tend to attribute that style of communication to culture, and maybe rightly so, but it is also something nurtured by Sufism. To communicate effectively with Sufis, surely we need to consider the communication style that they recognise as being appropriate to spiritual people. After all, Jesus spoke in parables too.

Sufis are used to being attacked by other Muslims who quote texts at them. When Christians do it too, they take it as an indication of a lack of true knowledge. For Sufis, true knowledge comes through relationship not reasoning. Such an understanding is not absent from the New Testament (see for example Matt. 11:25–30, John 17:3, 1 Cor. 8:1–3, 1 John 1:1–3), but as Evangelicals we are accustomed to presenting the gospel as a formula, as a solution to a problem, as a transaction.

Speaking to Sufis

For most expressions of Sufism, love is central. Love for the messenger is the mark of the true Muslim. Devotion to Muhammad is often so explicit and intense that Christians can only see it as idolatry and be repelled by it. We wonder how they can love the man we have read about. Part of the answer is that they have been told a very different story. However, our job is not to prove them wrong so much as to point them to something better and higher. For example, I was talking to a local Sufi leader.

“Loving the messenger,” he said, “is the most important thing.” He phrased it that way to include me, a Christian. I, too, should love “my messenger.”

“Very true,” I replied. “But is your love strong enough?”

His face fell. “No, it is never enough. He is worth so much more.”

“You are right,” I replied. “We cannot love as we should. But I have some good news. It is written in the Injil, ‘This is love. Not that we love God but that he has loved us.’ Knowing this love is the key. We love because he first loved us.”

He looked at me surprised and perhaps disturbed. “You are deep,” he said.

Before you ask, I did not go on to “and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins.” If he had asked me a question about this love from God, that would have been the next step, but he did not. Next time I see him, I will look for the opportunity to ask if he has discovered how God has loved us. I now carry the verse I quoted around in my wallet ready to leave with someone when we have such a conversation.

I was talking to another Sufi and he said, “We love Jesus. Jesus was very, very special.”

I replied, “That’s wonderful. I am glad that you love Jesus. And you know what he promised to those who love him?” And, of course, they don’t. “He said those that love him would keep his commandments and that he and his father would come and dwell in their hearts. That is such a precious promise.”

I cite these examples simply to show how, if we have thought about it ahead of time, we can introduce the gospel in a way that resonates with Sufi thinking and does not depend on the sort of approach that repels. The aim is to draw them to the person of Jesus. That in turn leads to the amazing things God has done through him so that we might have *koinonia*, fellowship, with him (1 John 1:3).

They do the same sort of holistic discipleship that Jesus did; knowledge and life are not separated—the disciple aspires to be like his teacher.

Much rethinking has gone on over the last couple of decades about what discipleship means in cross cultural mission. One of the things about Sufism is that the basic paradigm of discipleship is already present. To grow in faith, you need a teacher who directs and instructs, who shares wisdom and models life. Although their foundational truths are very different, they do the same sort of holistic discipleship that Jesus did; knowledge and life are not separated—the disciple aspires to be like his teacher. It should be possible to tap into this underlying non-Western understanding as we seek to make disciples.

Conclusion

It is not our business to decide which form of Islam is more authentic than the others.³² Our business is to bring them to the living Christ, that they might know him, love him and serve him, ever grateful for his death for them and his living presence with them. He alone is the perfect mediator provided by God. Such concepts are not unfamiliar to them, but they do not know him. Can we learn to introduce him to them in ways they will welcome? **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ Ron Geaves, *The Sufis of Britain* (Cardiff Academic Press, 2000), 126.

² For more details, see “Pir Abdul Wahab Siddiqui,” Aulia-e-hind.com, accessed March 23, 2019, <http://www.aulia-e-hind.com/dargah/Intl/UK.htm>.

³ Ron Geaves, *Sectarian Influences within Islam in Britain* (Monograph Series, Community Religions Project, University of Leeds, 1996), 123.

⁴ Ron Geaves, “Learning the Lessons” in *Sufism in the West*, ed. Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 150.

⁵ Hijaz College, About Us: History, “Shaykh Allama Muhammad Abdul Wahab

Siddiqi (ra) (1942–1994) - Mujadid of the 20th Century: A Reformer of the Modern Day,” accessed March 23, 2019, <http://www.hijazcollege.com/history.php>.

⁶ Sunday Mercury, “Muslim college in Midlands is running sharia law court,” BirminghamLive. Last modified October 23, 2012, <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/muslim-college-in-midlands-is-running-sharia-234317>.

⁷ Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), 225.

⁸ Ken Swartley, *Encountering the World of Islam* (Bottom Line Media, 2014), 233–236.

⁹ Arthur J. Arberry, *Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 134.

¹⁰ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 250.

¹¹ Jamal Malik, “Introduction,” in *Sufism in the West*, 10.

¹² Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders*, 248.

¹³ Nadia Abou al Magd, “Mubarak Appoints a New Chief at Al-Azhar,” *The National*, March 21, 2010, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/africa/mubarak-appoints-a-new-chief-of-al-azhar-1.593727>.

¹⁴ This Sufi song is performed and used around the world. A quick search on Youtube shows how widespread it is used. I first heard it in a small meeting in the UK. “Ali Elsayed” (song writer), Bandcamp, accessed March 23, 2019, <https://aliesayed.bandcamp.com/track/the-love-of-muhammad-pbuh>.

¹⁵ Nuh Ha Mim Keller, “The Place of Tasawwuf in Traditional Islamic Sciences” (lecture given at Islamic Foundation, Markfield Centre, Leicester, January 1995 and Croydon Mosque 30th January 1995), <http://masud.co.uk/the-place-of-tasawwuf-in-traditional-islamic-sciences/>.

¹⁶ Habib Umar bin Hafiz (@habib-bomar), “Someone who does not know that Muhammad is alive is dead. When someone knows that Muhammad is alive his heart comes to life.” Twitter, December 5, 2016, <https://twitter.com/worldofsufis?lang=en> 5th December 2016.

¹⁷ Habib Ali al-Jifri (@alhabibali), “The prophet is a means through which we connect to and come to know Allah,” Twitter, December 8, 2016, <https://twitter.com/worldofsufis?lang=en> 8th December 2016.

¹⁸ See for example, Swartley, *Encountering the World of Islam*, 138.

¹⁹ Sadek Hamid, "The Rise of the Traditional Islamic Networks" in *Sufism in Britain*, eds. Ron Geaves and Theodore Gabriel (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

²⁰ Ironically, Christians tend to use the term "Traditional Islam" to refer to that of the text book in contrast to lived Islam. What Salafi reformists are pursuing is original Islam not traditional Islam.

²¹ Abdal Hakim Murad (@Contentions), "If all Muslims were Sufis, all people would be Muslim." Twitter, November, 13, 2017, <https://twitter.com/worldofsufis?lang=en> 13th November 2017.

²² Geaves and Gabriel, *Sufism in Britain*, 32.

²³ Katherine Ewing, *Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psycho-analysis and Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

²⁴ One is reminded of al-Ghazali (c1061–1163) a great intellectual and jurist who shocked his world by abandoning his orthodox reputation to adopt the Sufi life. Sadakat Kadri, *Heaven on Earth: A Journey through Shari'a Law from the Deserts of Ancient Arabia to the Streets of the Modern Muslim World* (London: Vintage, 2013).

²⁵ Sadek Hamid, *Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016), 65.

²⁶ Amer Morgahi, "Reliving Classical Islam" in *Sufism in Britain*, 217.

²⁷ Standard introduction in all recent English language publications.

²⁸ Tahir ul-Qadri, *Islamic Spirituality and Modern Science* (London: Minhaj-ul-Quran Publications 2015), 113.

²⁹ Ian G. Williams, "Ours is not a caravan of despair. The influence and presence of the Turkish Sunni Nurcu Movement of Hojaeffendi Fethullah Gulen in the UK" in *Sufism in Britain*, 238. Also, Yakup Korkmaz, "Biblical Approaches to the Nurcu Gulen Movement in Turkey" in *Margins of Islam*, 59.

³⁰ *IJFM* 31:4, 2014.

³¹ Dr. Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri (@TahirulQadir), "Allah likes those who are soft-spoken. Speaking in a soft tone has been termed the best donation," Twitter, June 23, 2017, <https://twitter.com/worldofsufis?lang=en> 23rd June 2017.

³² See also discussion in Evelyne Reischer, "Who represents Islam?" in *Margins of Islam*, eds. Gene Daniel and Warrick Farah. Pasadena: William Carey Publishing 2018.

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