MYSTICAL STRATEGIES: SUFISM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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บทคัดย่อ

ลัทธิซูฟีกำลังถูกท้าทายเพิ่มขึ้นเรื่อย ๆ จากพลังของนวนิยมและขบวนการต่าง ๆ ของอิสลาม เช่นเดียวกับรูปแบบดั้งเดิมต่าง ๆ ของการแสดงออกทางศาสนาและสังคมของอิสลาม และเนื่องจากลัทธิซูฟีค่อนข้างจะใจกว้างและมีขันติธรรมต่อศาสนาอื่น ๆ ดังนั้นลัทธินี้จึงมีศักยภาพสูงในการที่จะก่อให้เกิดผลกระทบเชิงบวกต่อวิวัฒนาการทางสังคมของสังคมมุสลิมและที่ไม่ใช่มุสลิมในศตวรรษที่ 21 นี้ บทความนี้จะตรวจสอบดูว่าลัทธิซูฟีจะปรับตัวให้เข้ากับสภาพแวดล้อมใหม่ทางสังคมและบรรดาผู้นิยมใช้ตรรกะเชิงนวนิยมและอิสลามนิยมได้อย่างไร จำเป็นที่จะต้องศึกษาภาพรวมของลัทธิซูฟีในอดีตเพื่อให้เกิดดุลยพินิจว่าลัทธิซูฟีจะขานรับศตวรรษที่ 21 นี้ได้อย่างไร

Abstract

Like other traditional Islamic forms of religious and social expression, Sufism is becoming increasingly challenged by the forces of modernism and by the Islamicist movements. Yet, because of its tolerant view of other religious disciplines, there is great potential for Sufism to have a positive impact on the social evolution of Muslim and non-Muslim societies in the 21st century. This paper will investigate how Sufism can come to terms with this new social environment and its entourage of modernist and Islamicist logics. It involves an overview of Sufism's past to give some insight as to how it can respond to the 21st century.

Notwithstanding its apparent mystical and quietist import, the role

of Sufism may have an influential impact on the social evolution of Muslim and non-Muslim societies in the 21st century. Like other traditional Islamic forms of religious and social expression, Sufism is becoming increasingly impinged by the forces of modernism and Islamicist movements.

Although Sufism emerged from the political and social backdrop of the Umayyad dynasty which had in part strayed from the principles of nascent Islam, Sufism must now reformulate its position for the 21st century. Abdul Aziz Said views Sufism as a humanising response to the emergence of modernist models and their ruthless debunking of traditional forms of religion and value systems. But how will Sufism come to terms with this new social environment and its entourage of modernist and Islamicist logics? Perhaps, an overview of Sufism's past may give some insight as to how it will respond to the 21st century.

As Islam spread into North Africa, Asia and Europe during the 7th century it began to take on a cosmopolitan feel. Islamic scholars and administrators began to incorporate various knowledges from civilisations which they had encountered, inevitably leading to an efflorescence of scientific learning and inquiry – the age of Islamic science had been sparked. Generally speaking, early Muslims saw their relationship with their non-Muslim hosts as complementing their particular worldview. The saying of the Prophet Muhammad to "seek knowledge as far as China" prompted this spirit of co-existence and conveyed the "genius of authentic Islam" to coin Abdul Aziz Said.[1] Thus, the formation of Muslim societies was informed and contoured by their relationship with older civilisations.

The rationale of tolerance was further conveyed by various Sufi orders (*tariqa*) which spread throughout the Islamic world from the ninth century onwards. One of the hallmarks of traditional Sufism was its ability to adapt to the socio-cultural environments where it found itself in. This process of adaptation was often prompted by Sufism's willingness to incorporate beliefs and practices from other cosmologies. The Islamic scholar Stoddart claims that early Sufi thinkers sometimes borrowed ideas from Neo-Platonic and other spiritual traditions in order to broaden their doctrinal positions.[2]

Arguably, the Indian Sufi orders provide the most outstanding example of this syncretic attitude. For example, the *Chistiyyah* order became renowned for its broad range of humanitarian activities and prac-

tice of religious tolerance, which became an integral ideological bridge between Islam and Hinduism. There is little doubt that Sufi orders such as the *Chistiyyah* adopted a more liberal understanding of Hinduism, and emphasised communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims. Khizer even claims that:

> The Sufis, unlike the 'ulama' did not keep themselves aloof from Indian mainstream. They adopted local idiom and preached the message of love and universal brotherhood.[3]

On this note, it seems that Sufi orders were often more aware of the social conditions of the common people and tended to their spiritual and physical needs than the Islamic clerics.

Evans-Pritchard's classic study of the Sanusi order of Cyrenaica (1954) not only aroused a generation of studies of North African Sufi orders, but emphasised their social and political implications for North African societies. Evans-Prtichard pointed out that the austere nature of Islam in North Africa was considered by many lay Muslims as too rigid.[4] Consequently, Sufi orders tended to adopt more individualistic and experientialist approaches which found their social expression in present day saints' cults. A similar scenario is observed in many Muslim societies today, reaffirming Ziauddin Sardar's view that traditional Muslim communities are constantly reinventing and innovating tradition.[5]

Strategies For the Future

What can Sufi interpretations of Islam offer Muslim and non-Muslim societies in the present day and beyond? My guess is a great deal. However, initially what needs to be done is to dispel the notion of Sufism as an outdated and irrelevant form of "dervishism". The fact remains that in many Muslim societies such as India, Pakistan, the Central Asian Republics, and North Africa, Sufism continues to play a significant role in shaping and "sustaining communal identity".[6] In these societies a crucial source for the maintenance of Islamic cultural knowledge and practice derives

from the belief in Sufi saints. To believe in the collective of God's saints (*auliya*) and to perform pilgrimage at their shrines are personal forms of piety, which confer spiritual merit to believers. Not only are saints' shrines prominent features in the Islamic landscape, but clearly demonstrates the religious sway of Sufism for millions of Muslims.

It is also important to note how saints' shrines have for centuries been centres for genuine inter-religious harmony. When I was conducting field-work during 1994-5 at the shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi, I regularly witnessed Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs performing pilgrimage there. It was also common practice for Hindus to pray in the mosque there and for Sufi teachers to have non-Muslim disciples. One Sufi even compared the saint's shrine to an open bar where all people were welcome. This kind of communal harmony was all the more astonishing in light of the religious riots between Hindus and Muslims over the destruction of the Barbri mosque in Ayodha which had taken place a few years before, as well as the flagrant discrimination of Muslims in Maharashtra state and elsewhere in India.

What this kind of communal model indicates is not only the possibility for Muslims to live peacefully with people from other religions, but assists in the development of conflict resolution strategies in those Muslim societies experiencing civil turmoil. In one interview, Hussein Aidid, son of the deceased Somali warlord, stated his intention to implement a system of law in Somalia based on a Sufi model which is in accordance with Somalia's clan based social system. Aidid's remarks in large reflects the "popularist and grass roots"[7] backing of Sufism by many Muslims. Given its respect for "native traditions and customs" Sufism is strongly placed as a relevant social model for Islamic liberalism in the 21st century. As Abdul Aziz Said says:

> In the new international environment, viable conflict resolution requires an understanding of the beliefs, values, and behaviour of conflicting parties.[8]

In this vein, Sufism has provided and continues to offer a viable political and social rebuff of authoritarian regimes. Afghanistan is a case in point. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan Sufi orders played a

significant role of resistance, "offering solidarity and stability" to Afghans without consideration to their ethnic backgrounds.[9] Although the Sufi orders went underground during the ensuing civil wars, Sufi followers had pervaded every section of Afghan society. Sufi followers are also included in the present interim government.[10] The Sufi orders in the Central Asian Republics were also highly effective in fostering armed and ideological resistance against Tsarist and Soviet expansion.[11]

In the current climate of Islamicist resurgence Sufi inspired paradigms of inter-ethnic tolerance and liberal humanism (an Islamic development) are still a potent social force. Given the profound influence of Sufism on Muslim polity[12] it is unreasonable to suggest that Sufism is a spent force in the 21st century. It is because Sufism draws much of its social and moral power from the grassroots level that makes it a positive model for social change.

Ironically, it is the emerging global system's symbiotic paradigm which corresponds with Sufism's integral approach to social relations. Here perhaps, Sufism may offer a crucial ideological nexus between Islam and the West in the 21st century and beyond.

Endnotes

[1]Said, A. A. 2001. "Islam and the West: Toward Common Ground", in *Global Education Association*.

[2]Stoddart, W. 1994. *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam*, New Delhi: Taj Company. p. 43.

[3]Khizer, M. M. 1991. "Sufism and Social Integration", *Sufism and Carnival Harmony*, A. A. Engineer. (ed.) Jaipur, India: Printwell. P. 109.

[4]Evans-Pritchard, E. E. 1954. *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. p. 1-3.

[5]Sardar, Z. 2002. "Islam and the West in a Transmodern World", in *Islam Online*. June 5th. p. 2.

[6]Tyson, D. 1997. "Shrine and Pilgrimage in Turkmenistan as a Means to understand Islam Among the Turkmen", in *Central Asian Monitor - On-Line Supplement*. No.1. p. 1.

[7]Ferguson, R. J. 1996. "Meeting on the Road: Cosmopolitan Islamic Culture and the Politics of Sufism", in *The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Research Paper no. 4, December*. Bond University. School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

[8]Said, A. A. 1994. "A Sufi Response", in *Religion and World Order Symposium*. p. 4.

[9]Alexe, D. "Afghanistan: Sufi Brotherhoods Reemerge After the Fall of the Taliban, in *Radio Free Europe*. February 1st, 2002. p. 1.

[10]Alexe, D." "Afghanistan: Sufi Brotherhoods Reemerge After the Fall of the Taliban", in *Radio Free Europe*. February 1st, 2002. p. 3.

[11]Ferguson, R. J. 1996. "Meeting on the Road: Cosmopolitan Islamic Culture and the Politics of Sufism", in *The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Research Paper no. 4, December*. Bond University. School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

[12]Ferguson, R. J. 1996. "Meeting on the Road: Cosmopolitan Islamic Culture and the Politics of Sufism", in *The Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies, Research Paper no. 4, December*. Bond University. School of Humanities and Social Sciences.