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Mystical transcendence

May. 22, 2008

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During sunset, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari, a leading adherent of Sufism, worships on the roof of the Naqshabandi order's school for meditation on the northern edge of the Aksa complex in Jerusalem. Sheikh Atallah Nasser, the reciter at the Aksa Mosque, joins him in prayer. As the two men bow forward in unison, the wavering call of the muezzin pierces the air.

Later in the evening Bukhari, dressed in robes and shrouded in a thick fog of incense, takes a seat outside. Nasser begins to sing Sufi songs, while fellow adherents, including the imam of the Dome of the Rock, beat drums and clash cymbals. The image is one of a religious sect that manages to combine solemnity and joyousness.

Sufism is often lauded as the moderate face of Islam, and here in Israel the Naqshabandi Sufi order advocates interreligious tolerance and places a great emphasis on fostering feelings of love. Some Sufis argue that this tolerant spirit is fostered by a divine connection to other mystical movements, which transcends the religion from which they are derived and commentators are optimistic that it will come to overtake more fundamentalist approaches to the Koran, such as Wahhabism. However, Sufism's very existence is often troubling to the orthodox Muslim world and it lacks popular following. Furthermore, to say that Sufism is moderate at all is contentious in itself.

According to Naqshabandi tradition, Sufism is as old as Islam. Bukhari says that it was started by Abu Bakr Sadiki, the first man whom the Prophet Muhammad converted to Islam. The prophet and Abu Bakr, so the story goes, were being pursued through the desert from Mecca by an army intent on killing them. Finding nowhere suitable to hide, they crouched in a shallow cave. Abu Bakr was terrified, but Muhammad told him, "Do not fear, for Allah is with us."

Abu Bakr started repeating the name of Allah over and over again in his head, says Bukhari, until God covered the entrance to the cave with a spider web. The pursuers left it untouched, thinking that nobody could have entered it without damaging the fragile web.

After the prophet's death, Abu Bakr was appointed leader of the Muslims, but he had no experience in leadership, so, Bukhari says, he continued to repeat the name of Allah, which gave him the inspiration to lead. He told his companions that this helped him feel the presence of God, and they began to imitate him.

Bukhari states that from these simple origins different schools developed different meditation techniques, but they still based them around repetition of the name of Allah.

Sitting at daytime on a green divan in his "cave" - a miniature museum of his family's history - Bukhari elaborates on the benefits of Sufism as he sees them. In contrast to his appearance during the night, he is

dressed in a smart shirt and flannel trousers, with a mobile phone in one pocket - proof perhaps that even mystics need to come down to earth sometimes.

"Sufism," he says, "is based on worshiping God, not because we are ordered to worship God, but because we love God. A strong connection to Sufism makes you love everything in existence, love humankind and love the things which God ordered us to do."

In a typically enigmatic metaphor, he adds that the highest attainment of Sufism is to "swim in the ocean of God," meaning that the mystic becomes completely immersed in God's presence. "Because you are uniting yourself with God, all your actions and thoughts are aimed at Him."

This leads to results one might not normally associate with Islam. Bukhari, who sees himself in a family heritage dating back to the ninth-century scholar Ismail al-Bukhari, is a member of Jerusalem Peacemakers, a group which aims to establish interfaith tolerance.

Respect for other religions, he says, is essential to Sufism.

"There is a saying [in the Koran] that you are not a believer unless you love for others what you love for yourself. From this, Sufism established love among religions."

His work with the Jerusalem Peacemakers means that he is in contact with rabbis who also get involved in outreach groups. One of the group's more recent projects has been to decorate the partition wall between Israel and the West Bank with posters of Muslims and Jews from the same professions pulling faces for the camera. On the wall near Bethlehem, Bukhari can be seen wearing a fake beard next to his friend Eliahu Maclean.

There is a school of thought, often termed "perennialist," which says that this capacity for religious outreach, which Sufism seems to display, comes from a divine connection to mystic traditions from other religions.

Rabbi Menahem Froman, a kabbalist who lives in Tekoa, where he teaches the Zohar, like his Muslim counterpart in the Old City emphasizes the importance of unity to religious experience. He explains that the Zohar, Kabbala's integral text, attempts to find a "covenant" between man and God through rejecting the false temptations of the "Tree of Knowledge" and embracing the "Tree of Life."

Froman freely admits to the connection he feels with Sufism. In the past he has meditated the *Dhikr* - the reciting of Allah's 99 names - with Sufi sheikhs. This was partly a political point: He did so in a Gaza refugee camp. Meanwhile, he is infamous among his fellow settlers for his attempt to open dialogue with Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, founder of Hamas. However, he emphasizes the spiritual reasons that motivated him to venture into Gaza.

"We went to the camp because it is the home of a very important Sufi sheikh... although he had no Hebrew or English and my Arabic is very limited, we were still able to make a connection through meditation," he says.

WHILE FROMAN is considered by many religious Jews to be something of a maverick, his actions are not novel.

Dr. Avraham Elqayam is professor of mysticism at Bar-Ilan University. He has an attachment to Sufism which clearly goes beyond the academic. He himself has meditated with Sufi sheikhs and he explains that the actual practice of mysticism is an integral part of his course.

"I can tell you what an apple looks like, I can tell you its shape and color, but I can never tell you how it tastes," he says. "You must taste it yourself to find that out. It is the same with mysticism."

He explains that Bahya ibn Pakuda, who wrote *The Duties of the Heart* in the 11th century, first introduced Sufism to Judaism. Elqayam argues that Ibn Pakuda believed the incorporation of Muslim practice into Judaism was necessary because talmudic scholarship concentrated too heavily on "behaviorism" - the rituals of religion such as keeping Shabbat and attending synagogue.

Ibn Pakuda, Elqayam says, believed that the Prophet Muhammad and his followers had resurrected a lost Jewish emphasis on inner connection with God.

That Islam could be applied to Judaism is clearly something quite controversial, but it highlights how, in the world of mysticism, religious boundaries become blurred.

Froman says, with a wily smile, that he is a Jew in the sense that he believes in the power of the prophets, but he's not a Jew in the sense that he doesn't share in his people's hubristic notion of being God's chosen people.

Elqayam, meanwhile, argues that God does not have a religion. He claims that when you break through the confines of self-awareness, you stop thinking in terms of man-made concepts such as religion. As he points out, Sufism shares this history of rejecting religious constraints.

The great Sufi Ibn al-Arabi, for instance, wrote: "Beware of confining yourself to a particular belief and denying all else, for much good would elude you; indeed, the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself a matter for all forms of belief, for God is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one belief rather than another."

HOWEVER, DR. JONATHAN GARB of the Hebrew University, says that while the spiritual connection between different forms of mysticism is important, a certain amount of Sufism's influence on Jewish mysticism was a result of cultural strains in societies where Jews were a minority faced with the pressure to conform.

Garb also claims that it is generally impossible to view mysticism outside of the context of its own religious tradition and that it would thus be naive to view mystics as connected to one another rather than to their own religions.

"As the aim is often the performance of God's will through practice," he says, "it is hard to differentiate between aims and practice. For example, much of kabbalistic meditation is on the regular Jewish prayers. This is an example of how the kabbalistic path is embedded within a wider religious context."

Garb also warns against seeing Sufism as the pluralistic and accepting face of Islam, or of drawing this conclusion about mystics in general. "There is no reason to assume that mystics are more or less tolerant of other faiths than other religious persons," he says. "Ibn al-Arabi, heralded as a universalist, forbade Muslims to dwell under non-Muslim rule and opposed a peace treaty with the Christians."

The same appears to apply to classic Judaic mysticism: the founder of Chabad Hassidism, Garb comments, wrote that the soul of non-Jews is from the realm of evil - an idea which has its sources in the Zohar.

Indeed, Sufism has its own well-documented history of militant insurgency in Chechnya.

Prof. Ali Khan of Wasburn University notes that "following tradition, the Chechen Sufis teach love, reconciliation and forgiveness. However, Chechen Sufism has in recent centuries adopted militancy, at least since the first massive Russian aggression in 1785. The Chechen resistance then was led by a Sufi, known as Sheikh Mansur Ushurma. Declaring jihad, he and his men crushed the czarist forces. Ever since, Chechen Sufism has mixed and matched the elements of resistance - peace with war, the veil with the gun."

FURTHERMORE, THE idea that Sufism might one day become the dominant force within Islam is highly debatable, since its approach to religion sits so uncomfortably in the wider Muslim world.

Khaled Moghabi, a religious teacher at the Aksa Mosque, argues that Sufis have always posed a danger to Muslims. For one, Sufism, in his view, encourages naivety and simplicity of mind. He says it is no coincidence that most Sufis are poor and uneducated.

"They are very devout and pray for hours every day, yet they are easily deceived," he says. "It is not hard for a jinn to enter the body of a Sufi, because he does not understand the deception of the jinn. Because so many Muslims are influenced by the devotion of the Sufis and seek their help, they are unwittingly seeking help from jinns."

Jinns are part of the Islamic creation myth. Muslims believe that before God created man, He created jinns. However, they chose to worship false idols, so God drove them under the earth. Ever since they have been in a battle with God to lure man into believing in a multitude of divinities. Some jinns are believed to worship God, but those who do not have the potential to cause great grief to men, whose bodies they can possess.

Muslims often seek help from Sufis because, by reciting a relevant passage from the Koran, a sheikh is believed to channel its power and thus exorcise the demon. Even some Arabs who lead a rather secular life seem to believe in jinns. Haitham, an Old City resident descended from immigrants from Chad, explains that a whole chapter of the Koran is dedicated to discussing jinns, so to reject their existence would be to reject the Koran as absolute truth.

(There is, however, no unified view about exorcism among Sufi sheiks. While some proudly claim to have the power, Bukhari for instance says that, although some Sufis have the ability to endure great physical pain during religious ceremonies, they do not know magic.)

Moghabi estimates that nine out of 10 Sufi sheikhs are possessed by jinns. While this highlights a condescension towards Sufis, it also underlines a deep mistrust of them. He points out that it is a basic Islamic belief that for a jinn to enter a man, the man must first approach the jinn. Thus, by this reasoning, for a Sufi to be possessed he must be a complicit partner.

That Moghabi wishes Sufis to be portrayed in such a way is no doubt based on his second reason for saying they should not be trusted.

"Sufis try to describe God," he says. "By doing this they are making God like a man, and if you make God like a man it is easier to make man like a God."

This is unnerving to anyone who is basing their faith on accepting Allah as the one and only God, for Moghabi estimates that about 99.9 percent of what Allah desires of us is submission to this concept.

ALTHOUGH MANY Sufis see mystical experience as something indescribable, there are notable exceptions. Dhul Nunal-Misri (d. 861) espoused the doctrine of *irfan* - direct knowledge of the divine, and was subsequently arrested by Caliph Mutawakkil. Even more controversially, Al-Hallaj (d. 922) pronounced "I am God," and ultimately paid with his life. What mystics see as a profound utterance of a man's unity with God, Islamic clerics saw as a man putting himself forward as a false idol.

According to an article on ww4report.com, Sufism has been in this conflict with mainstream Islam since its inception, but it has now been thoroughly defeated by fundamentalism. "The fundamentalists today," it says, "attack the surviving Sufis, seeing their struggle as a unified jihad against both imperialism and heresy."

The oppression is ongoing. In November the Associated Press reported that dozens of Sufis of the

Nematollahi-Gonabadi order, which has had an increasingly uneasy relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran's clerical regime, were shot and wounded by police. Their lodge was reported to have been bulldozed to the ground.

Meanwhile, the article argues that Sufism has lost popular support to fundamentalism, because it preaches a form of universalism which is now associated with the West.

"All over the Islamic world, the disaffected flock to Wahhabism and related doctrines as the alternative to the corruption of official leaders and their supine stance before imperialism and globalization," it claims. "And because imperialism and globalization have appropriated the mantles of secularism, pluralism, tolerance, universalism - these are also being rejected. This final reality has much to say about why it is Wahhabism rather than Sufism that now provides the wellspring of resistance."

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