

CONTINUITY AND VARIETY IN ISLAMIC THOUGHT AND PRACTICE: A COSMOLOGICALLY GROUNDED OVERVIEW

1. ALLAH AND HIS PROPHET

- 1.1. Allah is an unfathomable transcendent Power, and the sole source of all existence.
- 1.2. Allah created the existent world so that He might be known to and worshipped by His creation.
- 1.3. Since humankind is the highest form of existence within that world, the principal duty of human beings is to acknowledge and respect Allah's role as the creator, and to fulfill His wishes by offering Him worship and by obeying His laws.
- 1.4. Allah has made known both His role as creator and the behavioural laws which humankind should follow through the increasingly detailed revelations to a series of Prophets (*nabi*). The most important of these were Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed.
- 1.5. Mohammed ibn Abdullah was the last and the most perfect of these *nabi*, to whom Allah chose to reveal the *Qur'an sharif*. Its contents are the uncreated and hence timeless and unchangeable — Word of Allah Himself.
- 1.6. The Prophet was a human being; Islam will have no truck with any kind of polytheism. Nevertheless as the “ seal of the Prophets Mohammed has a unique status: Allah chose to endow him with His final and most complete revelation because he was *insan-e-kamil* — the perfect man. Because the Prophet was uniquely close to and beloved of Allah, he gained direct access to Allah's presence during the course of the *miraj* (the night journey). Because of the Prophet's unique condition of perfection, no-one but he has ever been able to witness Allah in all His ineffable majesty and power.
- 1.7. Since Allah is by definition One and indivisible, Islam vigorously rejects the Christian view that any of the Prophets, Jesus included, was the son of God. Mohammed, like all his predecessors, was human. Nevertheless he was so beloved by Allah that He chose to use him as the means of revealing Himself and His wishes to humankind. Hence the Prophet provides unique channel for communication between Allah and mankind, and as such is regarded as a model of human perfection, the *insan-e-kamil*.
- 1.8. Because of this the principal duty of committed believers is to follow the Prophet's *sunna* (example) by modelling their lives not only on the revelations contained in the *Qur'an* itself, but also on those which were made manifest in the Prophet's own personal life and behaviour. The more closely one models one's own life on the *sunna* of the Prophet, the

more closely one will be following the expectations of Allah Himself, and the better Muslim one will therefore be.

2. BEING A MUSLIM

- 2.1. For those seeking to emulate the Prophet's *sunna*, being a Muslim has two contrasting but interconnected dimensions, i) outward and behavioural, (*zahir*) and ii) inward and spiritual (*batin*). Since the Prophet's death Muslims have put a great deal of intellectual, scholarly and mystical effort into identifying just how they can best emulate these two mutually interdependent dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*.
- 2.2. Islam has no formal priesthood: its followers can (and regularly do) seek guidance from Muslims whose religious knowledge and experience is greater than theirs, but it is the duty of every living being to make up his or her own mind as to how the Prophet's *sunna* can best be emulated. As a result Islam has become an increasingly diverse religious movement since the Prophet's death. Hence even though Allah, the Prophet and the *Qur'an* are all by definition unique and uncontested, living Islam has evolved into ever-growing series of interconnected strands as each group of Muslims has interpreted the Prophet's *Sunna* in differing ways.
- 2.3. This condition of multi-strandedness is in no way unique to Islam. All the world's major religious traditions, including those of the Christians, the Jews, the Hindus and the Buddhists exhibit similar diversities. Hence a search for “Islamic orthodoxy” is necessarily vain. Although the followers of any given strand of thinking will insist that their own interpretation is the best and most insightful understanding of the Prophet's *sunna*, so much so that they may well condemn all other interpretations as gravely mistaken, their opponents will invariably make exactly the same judgement in reverse. Hence as scholarly analysts our principal task is to map out the many dimensions of this diversity, rather than to attempt to make judgements about which of these interpretive strands is most accurate and correct. Only believers — and Allah Himself! — can do that with any confidence.
- 2.4. Islam began this process of diversification virtually from its inception, and this has continued ever since. However two major strands in this process are worth distinguishing: i) the way in which Muslims have sought to emulate the Prophet's *sunna* in — and hence *behavioural* terms, and ii) the way in which they have sought to do so in internal, and therefore *spiritual* and *mystical* terms. The first path can conveniently be identified as one of *shari'a*, and the second of *tariqa*. Yet although separable from one another in analytical terms, these two dimensions are complementary to one another: not only does the clearest and most explicit message vouchsafed to the Prophet — the *Qur'an* — address both these dimensions, but the text has much more to say about the latter than the former.

3. SHARI'A

- 3.1. Following the Prophet's death, his followers made great efforts to compile an accurate record of the *Qur'an* itself — which had in any event been vouchsafed to its recipient in verbal form — as well as of the Prophet's own personal doings and sayings. The latter are collectively known as *hadith*. There is little or no dispute about the contents of the *Qur'an*, since Islamic scholars settled upon an agreed version soon after Mohammed's death. By contrast the *hadith* literature is much less certain. A huge mass of stories about the Prophet's doings and sayings grew up after his death, some of which were clearly much less reliable than others.
- 3.2. Given that there was a great deal of debate about the precise details of the behavioural dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*, early Islamic scholars put a great deal of effort into scrutinising the *Qur'an* in order to extract the behavioural injunctions which it either contains or could be said to contain — for the text contains relatively few clear and unambiguous rulings. In so doing they also supplemented their analyses by constantly referring to a huge mass of *hadith*, whose accuracy and reliability they also had to assess. Their objective was to construct a set of behavioural injunctions, the *Shari'a*, which would provide Muslims with an unequivocal guide to proper behaviour — and thus to the Prophet's *sunna* — in every conceivable personal situation.
- 3.3. Even so the *Shari'a* is manifestly *not* canonical. Firstly it is differentiated into four separate schools of thought; each aims to be internally consistent, but in so doing often reaches differing conclusions, especially on matters of fine detail. Secondly the *shari'a* is only advisory: faced with any kind of difficulty or dilemma, Muslims are invited to consult a jurist — *mufti* — for a scholarly opinion — *fatwa* — on the matter. However unless the civil authorities choose to back those decisions up, the *mufti* has no means of enforcing his decision, and in any event a different *mufti* might well reach a different conclusion on the same issue. Which — if any — of these alternatives gets implemented has always been more a matter of politics than theology. Thirdly the *shari'a* is primarily concerned with identifying the correct forms of personal conduct, and most especially of worship, of personal hygiene (a prerequisite for acceptable worship), of family life, of charity, and in the context of interpersonal commercial transactions with other Muslims.
- 3.4. *Shari'a* should therefore not be mistaken for “law” in the Roman or Western sense. Muslim rulers (*Sultan*, *Emir*) issued their own edicts, *farman*, and sustained their own sets of administrative law, *qanun*. Moreover local Muslim communities have always also followed their own distinct forms of custom and practice, *riwaj*. These procedures were quite separate from, and did not seek to base themselves in, the *shari'a*, so it is doubtful whether the *shari'a* has ever been systematically enforced in any Muslim state and/or community. Hence the *shari'a* is probably best understood as a series of sets of scholarly conclusions which have steadily evolved over time, and to which individual Muslims have looked as a source of inspiration as to how best to emulate the Prophet's *sunna*.
- 3.5. Since the *shari'a* is a matter of interpretation, and relatively few Muslims have sufficient knowledge to undertake that task for themselves. Hence scholars, *ulema*, play a very salient

role throughout the Islamic world, for it is to them that Muslims look for instruction as to how best to emulate the behavioural dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*.

4. TARIQA

- 4.1. Despite the crucial role of the *shari'a* as an indication of Islam's ideal behavioural norms, this is only one dimension of the Prophet's *sunna*, and for most Muslims the spiritual and mystical dimensions of his experience are of just as great importance, if not more so. For whilst *ulema* have put a great deal of effort into teasing out rules of behaviour, the *shari'a* is primarily analytical and legalistic in its approach, and so has little or nothing to say about matters of spirituality. Its focus is on what believers should *do*, rather than on the inner experiences which they might have whilst performing those actions.
- 4.2. By contrast *tariqa*, the spiritual and mystical dimension of Islam, is overwhelmingly concerned with emulating the experiential dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*, and as such is primarily grounded in philosophical and symbolic speculation, rather than the hair-splitting legalism so characteristic of *shari'a*. Hence if the *shari'a* is a monument to the careful scholarship of the *ulema*, it is the mystical and spiritual commitment of an immense number of *pirs*, *sheikhs*, and *murshids* which has given rise to Islam's many *tariqa* has been
- 4.3. Since it is the Prophet's own spiritual experience which is the *sunna* around which all these *tariqa* have evolved, a great deal of theological effort has been put into conceptualising the precise nature of the relationships between Allah, His Creation, the bearer of His revelation (i.e. the Prophet) and its witnesses (ie humankind).
- 4.4. Although each *tariqa* has consequently developed its own theology and cosmology — just as each of the four classical schools of law has developed its own separate but internally consistent version of the *shari'a* — all have nevertheless done so within the context of an interpretation of the same *Qur'anic* text; hence they also share a common basic vision of the Prophet's role as a mystical and spiritual guide to the way in which the ineffable mystery of the One (Allah himself) can be understood.

5. THE MYSTICAL (*batin*) COSMOLOGY OF ISLAM

- 5.1. Although Allah requires Muslims to acknowledge and bear witness to His majesty and magnificence, so comprehensive is his oneness Allah's true nature is far beyond the comprehension of mankind, with just one exception. Precisely because of his unique status as *insan-e-kamil*, the Prophet had the capacity to enter directly into Allah's otherwise overwhelming presence during the *miraj*, and hence to become the bearer of Allah's final revelation of Himself to humankind.
- 5.2. The Prophet is therefore a necessary intermediary between the witnesses (humankind) and the witnessed (Allah). This leads on to an even more elaborate trope. Had Allah not created

the world, His majesty would have remained forever unwitnessed. Hence if Allah's purpose in creating existence was to allow Himself to be witnessed, it is the duty of all creation, and of humankind in particular, to acknowledge the wonders of His creative powers.

- 5.3. Nevertheless precisely because everyone other than the Prophet is less than perfect, no-one but he could be expected to pierce the veils of ignorance and gain a direct audience with Allah Himself. Hence the Prophet plays a crucial role as an intermediary between Allah and His creation. Indeed it is precisely because of the Prophet's unique status as *insan-e-kamil* that he provides a kind of conduit between Allah's ineffable majesty and the atomic participants in created existence. Since Allah cannot, by definition, do this himself, the very purpose of the Prophet's existence was to provide a *sunna* to mankind.
- 5.4. The Prophet therefore occupies a unique position in the created world, for although created — Allah alone is beyond that — Mohammed is nevertheless the model of perfection. Hence it is widely argued that Allah must have created the Prophet before anyone or anything else, and that Mohammed therefore has a *permanent* presence creation, from the beginning to the end of time, even if he was only physically manifest during the limited period of his earthly lifetime.

6. EMULATING THE PROPHET'S SPIRITUAL EXAMPLE

- 6.1. How, though, can Muslims best emulate the spiritual and mystical dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*, given that his spiritual status is quite unique? Those who are less perfect than he cannot, for example, expect to emulate his *miraj*. The solution which most have adopted focuses on the Prophet's role as an intermediary with Allah: Muslims should seek to establish the same kind of relationship with the Prophet as he himself has with Allah. Hence the Prophet is not only regarded as the means whereby Allah has made Himself known His creation, but also as the vehicle through which less than perfect mankind can come to know, and to establish a relationship with, the otherwise incomprehensible. If so it follows that the most effective way of following the Prophet's spiritual *sunna* is to seek to build a relationship between themselves and the Prophet which parallels — and hence emulates — that between the Prophet and Allah.
- 6.2. How, though, can this be achieved now that the Prophet is long dead? A number of solutions are possible. These include the belief a) that the Prophet has not decayed within his burial chamber, and that his tomb in Medina therefore provides an appropriate focus for such devotion, b) that the Prophet is a being beyond space and time, to whom devotion is still possible even though he has ceased to be physically manifest in the created world, or c) that the Prophet passed on the illumination he had received to his spiritual successors, who are in turn in a position to pass it on to others.
- 6.3. In this respect Ali, the Prophet's much-beloved nephew and son in law, stands in a crucial symbolic position. Given Ali's physical closeness to the Prophet, all of Ali's descendants, known collectively as *Sayyid*, are regarded as having a hereditary share in the Prophet's condition of enhanced spirituality. Besides this Ali also regarded as the Prophet's closest

spiritual disciple, hence as playing a central role in passing on the mystical dimension of the Prophet's *sunna* not only to his own disciples, but to his disciples' disciples. of their own. This led to the establishment of innumerable chains of discipleship, *silsila*, each of which trace its origins back through Ali and the Prophet — and hence to Allah Himself. It is the continuity of the links in the *silsila* which guarantees the authenticity of the spiritual understanding which each transmits.

- 6.4. To seek to follow the Prophet's spiritual *sunna* outside a *silsila*, or in other words in the absence of guidance from a spiritual master (*pir*, *sheikh*, or *murshid*) who has not himself been properly initiated by someone whose spiritual inspiration runs back through Ali to the Prophet is dangerous to the point of folly. Iblis (Satan) constantly seeks to ensnare the foolish into believing that he is Allah. Hence he who remains *be-Piri*, lacking spiritual guidance it is only too likely to fall into Iblis' clutches.
- 6.5. Hence the *Pir* plays a crucial role in the *Tariqa* dimension of Islam. *Pirs* are primarily responsible for transmitting the spiritual dimension of the Prophet's *sunna*, and are able to do so as a result of their efforts to emulate the Prophet's relationship with and understanding of Allah, whose "friends", *wali*, they consequently become. Hence laymen in search of spiritual inspiration are expected to devote themselves as comprehensively to their *Pir* as the *Pir* does to his "friends" Ali, Mohammed and ultimately Allah Himself. Hence "Whilst the *ka'aba* is the *qibla* of the body (i.e. the direction in which Muslims should offer their physical prayers, *namaz*) the *pir* is the *qibla* of the soul".

7. SHARI'A AND TARIQA COMPARED

- 7.1. In many respect the behavioural and spiritual dimensions of Islam stand in complementary tension with one another. Without the mystical and spiritual vitality of the *tariqa*, the formality of the inherent in *shari'a* would render Islam as dry as dust; and in the absence of the social order and intellectual coherence which the *shari'a* promotes, the uninhibited commitment which *tariqa* enjoins would reduce Islam to ecstatic chaos. All versions of Islam therefore include aspects of both trends — albeit in differing degrees — within themselves.
- 7.2. In so far as it prioritises order, formality, and obedience to a given and clearly established set of rules, the *shari'a* dimension of Islam has always been particularly attractive both to rulers and to urbanites. Hence whilst *tariqa* practice has always been present in every Islamic city, it has always tended to be attenuated by — and in extreme circumstances has been in danger of being swamped by — *shari'a* inspired formalism.
- 7.3. Moreover to the extent that power elites so often turn to the spiritual resources of *tariqa* to reinforce and legitimise their position of hegemonic (and exploitative) authority, leading *Pirs* have frequently done everything they can to decouple themselves from Royal patronage — and thus to avoid both cities and their emirs.

- 7.4. By contrast with *shari'a* formalism, *tariqa* strongly prioritises commitment, experience and a strong sense of brotherhood, especially amongst those who are devotees of a common *pir* (the relationship between a *pir* and his *murids* is by contrast strongly hierarchical, not least because it ultimately parallels that between Allah and his Prophet). The *tariqa* dimension therefore tends to be particularly attractive to – and is therefore strongly elaborated by – those who live outside the city, such as farmers and nomads.
- 7.5. As Ibn Khaldun famously argued, almost all Islamic societies have displayed a recurrent dynamic whereby ossifying and formalistic *shari'a* inspired urban hierarchies have been repeatedly overthrown by spiritually-inspired forces of renewal sweeping in from the desert, until the newly established dynasty itself surrenders to the pleasures and comforts of an inegalitarian and ever more exploitative social order, so in turn becoming ripe for yet another round of reform and renewal.
- 7.6. The *pirs* have also played a major role in the process of conversion to Islam: most communities were first drawn into the *tariqa* dimension of the faith under the influence of the inspired teaching of charismatic saints, and several generations often passed before those involved began to consider adopting the behavioural formalities of the *shari'a*. In this respect it is worth noting that although the early process Islamic expansion was overwhelmingly achieved by military means, its propagators had little or no immediate interest in converting their newly acquired subjects to Islam: what mattered far more that those over whom they had imposed their authority acknowledged the political legitimacy of their new Islamic overlords by paying their taxes on demand.
- 7.7. Hence whilst the *ulema* might insist that it was the religious duty of Islamic rulers to propagate Islam by enforcing the *shari'a*, most Emirs and Sultans took the view that to pursue a policy which might alienate their subjects, and thus undermine the stability of their rule would be most unwise. Hence whatever legalistic theory might seem to suggest, attempts to impose conversion to Islam by the sword were much rarer in practice than Crusader-inspired scholarship has sought to suggest.
- 7.8. In view of this conversion to Islam has in fact been overwhelmingly a voluntary process in which commitment to a *tariqa* invariably came first, whilst efforts to conform to the principles of the *shari'a* followed a good deal later on. Hence although Islam is very much a world religion — and as such is a great deal more homogeneous than Christianity — it is quite impossible to identify a single form of “orthodox Islam” which towards which these processes of conversion converge. Instead Islamic societies are better understood ones in which the *tariqa* and the *shari'a* dimensions of the faith are both actively present, but where there is a constant and highly productive dialectic of mutual tension between them.
- 7.9. Hence there can *never* be a comprehensively agreed upon condition of orthodoxy. On the one hand those who are primarily concerned with gaining mystical inspiration in the *sufi* tradition tend to be vigorously critical of those who see conformity with the principles of the *shari'a* as the heart of Islam, arguing that those who are bewitched by behavioural and ritual exactitude tend to overlook the spiritual purposes of the Prophet's *sunna*; and on the other hand the proponents of *shari'a* conformity are just as critical of the *sufis* on the

grounds that their spiritual fervour cannot be used an excuse for deviation from the behavioural essentials of the Prophet's *sunna*.

8. VARIATION AND ELABORATION IN ISLAMIC COSMOLOGY

- 8.1. Both the *tariqa* and the *shari'a* dimensions of Islam contain an immense amount of variation, and although involvement with the more “sober” *tariqa* may be compatible with some of the more relaxed interpretations of the *shari'a*, many of those who understand the Prophet's *sunna* in more ecstatic and mystical terms (ie the so-called “drunken” schools of *sufi* thought) often insist that spiritual experience is all, and that if that leads them to bypass some of the behavioural injunctions on which the *shari'a* insists, then so be it.
- 8.2. As a result of these potentialities, Islam's mystical dimension has displayed an immense amount of intellectual, philosophical, symbolic and experiential fertility, both in its own terms, and in its ability to absorb and to build yet further upon ideas, images and understanding which were originally generated in other traditions, and especially those of the Greeks, the Hindus and the Buddhists. In purely geographical terms, Khorasan (the area immediately to the north of contemporary Afghanistan), and whose population had been *sahajiya* Buddhists prior to their conversion to Islam, produced an immensely influential stream of *sufi* thinkers. These developments were in turn consolidated and elaborated by one of Islam's most sophisticated and influential theologians, Ibn Arabi (1165 - 1240).
- 8.3. At the core of Ibn Arabi's thinking is the notion of *wahadat-e-wajud*, the unity of being. Drawing — or so I would suggest — on both tantric and *vishistadvaita* (qualified non-dualist) developments in late medieval Hindu and Buddhist philosophical thought to further illuminate Islamic theology, Ibn Arabi developed the well-established principle of *tauhid* (unity) to argue that if Allah is One, everything which exists is a manifestation of Allah, and hence in a profound sense *is* Allah. Hence as well as being the transcendent Source of all existence, God is simultaneously immanent in throughout His created world. The universe through which Allah has revealed himself is therefore simultaneously the veil which conceals him.
- 8.4. But whilst the transcendent dimensions of Allah's being are consequently as vast — and as incomprehensible to human experience — as Islamic theologians have always asserted, Ibn Arabi also insisted that nature itself is also a manifestation of *Haq*, the divine Truth. Hence that which is transcendent is simultaneously immanent in — and hence accessible through — the created world, which is, of course, none other than He.
- 8.5. This perspective allowed Ibn Arabi to elaborate the well-established *sufi* argument that Islam is above all an *internal* experience. If the divine reality is immanent in every component of the created world, it follows — as Hindu and Buddhist philosophers had long held — that one has no need to look beyond oneself, or rather the core of one's own being, to find the divine *Haq*, provided one has sufficient spiritual commitment to overcome the selfish and materialistic distractions of everyday existence.

8.6. Not surprisingly, those committed to a more formal approach to the Prophet's *sunna* were often alarmed by such developments, no matter how philosophically sophisticated the arguments which thinkers like Ibn Arabi may have advanced to support them. As a result they made frequent attempts to dismiss and discredit such ideas and their associated practices, not least by classifying them as *kufir*, unbelief.

8.7. Even so this gnostic perspective, and especially the cosmological vision which underpins it, has had an immense influence on popular religious practice throughout the Islamic world, and continues to do so to this day.

9. Sufism in South Asia: the role of *ishk*

9.1. A key element in Ibn Arabi's thought was his elaboration of the doctrine of the *insan-e-kamil*, and his consequent suggestion that as a result of the principle of *wahadat-al-wujud* (the unity of being), all sufficiently committed spiritual adepts could seek to emulate the Prophet's *miraj* by finding *haq* within themselves, since every being is itself a manifestation of the Absolute. From this perspective Hallaj's cry of "*ana al haq*" (I am Truth) was anything but blasphemy: rather it was the consequence of an ecstatic experience where all distinctions between the worshipper and the worshipped had been comprehensively annihilated. Hallaj may indeed have been executed for his pains by the defenders of *shari'a* orthodoxy, but to this day he is popularly remembered not as a blasphemer but as a *shaheed*, a martyr.

9.2. In a further elaboration of the doctrine of *wahadat-al-wujud*, *sufis* in South Asia not only envisaged the relationship between worshipper and the worshipped as being analogous to that between the lover and the beloved (a routine feature of almost all mystical traditions) but also elaborated the notion of *ishk* (passion) as a means of achieving the condition of non-distinction, and hence of self-annihilation, which is the ultimate objective of mystical experience. This led to an explosion of popular mystical poetry in which the relationship between two lovers — Hir and Ranjha, Laila and Majnun, Sassi and Pannu, Radha and Krishna — served as an analogue of the potential relationship between oneself and the Divine. In a further elaboration of this idea, whilst life itself is perceived as offering human beings a *prospect* of achieving union with the Ultimate (or in other words an overwhelming mystical experience of the kind which led Hallaj to make his notorious utterance, and which is closely akin to the experience identified as *sahaj* in Indic contexts), our involvement in the veils of existence (ie in life/*samsara* itself) is simultaneously the very *cause* of separation between the lover and the Beloved. If *viraha* — pain-in-separation — is therefore central to human experience, it is only in death itself that permanent and comprehensive union/extinction can be achieved.

9.3. In the context of popular Islam, this theological vision is by no means arcane, so much so that those who manifest a strong commitment to *ishk* during their lifetime are routinely assumed to have achieved comprehensive reunion with their Beloved at death. Hence in their case death is described as *'urs*, marriage. Their tombs consequently become sites of powerful spiritual illumination, for they mark a spot where a lover remains in

comprehensive — and therefore permanent — reunion with his or her Beloved. Hence the tombs of *Pirs*, *Mazar*, become sites of pilgrimage to which laymen and particularly women resort, most particularly in times of personal affliction and difficulty. Even if his everyday followers are unable comprehensively to emulate the *Pir's* heroic reunion with the Divine, what they *can* (and do) do is to devote themselves to the buried *Pir*, and in so doing seek his assistance in presenting their case to his beloved companion: God Himself.

9.4. Innumerable shrines, which mark the burial spots of such a saintly beings, can be found throughout the Islamic world. Some have been erected over the graves of well-known *Pirs* and *Sheikhs* whose writings and teachings are still well known to this day; others mark the graves of saintly adepts whose reputations extended no more than a few miles around their home villages; others stand on sacred spots of such long standing that memory of just who or what was buried there is now all but extinguished; others yet again have been built on spots which have manifested themselves by their miraculous impact on the lives of passers by, and which have led local devotees to erect a shrine to the long-dead and long-forgotten saint who must "quite obviously" have been buried there.

9.5. Worship at such shrines have a marked gender dimension. Whilst women are excluded from worship in the public *Masjed* — although they are in no way restricted from offering *namaz* in the privacy of their own homes — a majority of the devotees at most shrines are women.

9.6. Innumerable shrines of this kind can be found throughout Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. The smallest are little more than tiny marked off enclosures under a tree; the largest are elaborate and beautifully decorated monuments which attract huge numbers of pilgrims and devotees, often from very far afield. In the case of the most important shrines of all, an explicit parallel with *haj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, is often drawn, such that it is often suggested that five visits to the shrine of Mu'in-ud-din Chisti in Ajmer (the founder of *Chistiyya tariqa*) is regarded as being of the same spiritual value as the full *haj* to Mecca.

9.7. Activity at such shrines has two peaks. Firstly, and most frequently, on *jume raat*, the day before the weekly formal day of prayer on Friday, when the Saints are held to enter into particularly close communion with their Beloved. Secondly, and most elaborately, on their *'urs*, the anniversary of the saint's death and hence reunion with his beloved: at major shrines huge crowds of both women and men gather to celebrate this event. Everything under the sun is celebrated at a popular *'urs*. Lay devotees offer their personal respects to the shrine itself, and often make private supplications whilst they do so; wearing their best, they also participate in all the fun of the fair, from Ferris Wheels and Walls of Death to trinket sellers and dancing girls; spiritual adepts gather to remember and celebrate their Master's teaching; and as night falls, huge crowds gather to hear *qawwalis* sing devotional songs in praise of the Prophet, of Ali, of the buried Saint, and of the trials and tribulations of human existence where lovers are so often parted from their beloved, as well of the ecstatic delight which can be achieved on those rare points of wonderment when all such obstacles are overcome. The whole World is here: Allah may at one level be un-knowably transcendent, but at the same time his presence is manifest in every scrap of His creation,

and most especially in every human heart. Nothing is excluded from worship in popular Islam.

10. THE BOUNDARIES OF ISLAM

- 10.1. Intellectual formalism invariably seeks to establish boundaries in a quest for order: and with this in mind Islamic scholars in the *shari'a* tradition have put an immense amount of effort into establishing just what are the forms of behaviour to which Muslims should seek to conform in emulating the Prophet's *sunna*, as opposed to those which should be avoided at all costs. For those committed to this deeply sober view, the establishment and maintenance of rules and boundaries of all sorts is the key to what Islam is all about. Any attempt to muddy, muddle or subvert them is necessarily destructive of the promise of *din* itself.
- 10.2. By contrast spiritual devotionalism prioritises the fullness of experience, and thus passionate commitment, above all else. From this perspective the rules, conventions and boundaries which the formalists have so carefully constructed are — in the last analysis — no more than the veils which necessarily separate lovers from their beloved in the existent world. Hence although rules and conventions may be the necessary foundations of everyday life, the purpose of religion should not be to sustain these conventions, as the formalists insist, but to *transcend* them. This Islam, like Allah himself, has no boundaries: hence any attempt to impose them within the context of Allah's multifaceted creation is counter to His purposes, and necessarily destructive of the promise of *din* itself.

11. ISLAM IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

- 11.1. Despite the fashionable tendency to talk about “modern Islam” as if it had recently taken on a completely different guise from its earlier manifestations, all the processes outlined in the previous sections of this paper are alive and well: in this sense contemporary Islam is as multi-stranded tradition as it ever was, and can be found in the whole gamut of possibilities, from the scrupulous sobriety which *shari'a* inspired formalists aim at least in principle to achieve, right through to the more ecstatic and ultimately iconoclastic forms of devotionalism of those who follow that more “drunken” paths of *sufi* commitment. Needless to say the more typical forms of Islamic practice fall somewhere in between, and consequently draw extensively on both the contrasting dimensions which I have outlined here.
- 11.2. While Islam has always been a dynamic, varied and therefore an ever changing tradition, it has nevertheless developed a significant new dimension in recent years, of a kind which we can conveniently label as “political Islam”. This is not to suggest that earlier manifestations of the Islamic tradition have in any way been politically neutral: on the contrary ever since its inception all the various dimensions of the Islamic tradition have been deeply involved in political processes. Yet even though Islamic theologies, just like the theologies which have been developed in all other religious traditions, sought to develop an advisory position on all the issues on which believers might be involved, and hence amongst other things on

matters of politics and government, and even though Islam also developed a conceptual vocabulary which included terms such as *umma* and *jihad*, both of which suggest that Muslims have a powerful duty to engage in collective political action, it is striking that through many centuries of Islamic history this potentiality was very rarely implemented. The nominal authority of the Khilafat over the *umma* as a whole was very soon subverted, and although numerous Sultans and Emirs may have been Muslim rulers, none to could seriously pretend to rule all Muslims, and the population of their kingdoms were rarely, if ever, comprehensively Muslim. Nor did they seek comprehensively to implement the *shari'a*, however much they might claim to be guided by it, if only because that would entail ceding all power to the *ulema*. Instead their preferred solution was to “buy” a pliant set of scholars to implement their will, which was one reason why serious scholars of the *shari'a* always sought to keep royal patronage at arms length.

- 11.3. Nevertheless during the course of the past century, and most especially against a backdrop of head-on conflictual encounters with the forces of Euro-American colonial and neo-colonial hegemony, a new political dynamic has begun to emerge in almost every corner of the Islamic world. The result has been the emergence of a wide variety neo-reformist groups all of which share a common objective: to (re)generate a new sense of political solidarity amongst all Muslims within a given region — and better still the entire *umma* — the better to enable them to resist the overweening power of Euro-American hegemony. The *jamaat-i-islami* in India and Pakistan, the *ikwan* in Egypt, and the FIS in Algeria are all examples of the kind of movement that I have in mind.
- 11.4. What do such movements have in common? And in any event how novel a phenomenon are they? In so far as they invariably promote *shari'a* orthodoxy — and indeed often put the (re)introduction of the *shari'a* at the core of their political program — such movements are frequently identified as “fundamentalist”. At one level this is nothing new at all. In so far as one dimension of Islam has always sought to emulate the behavioural dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna*, and has sought to do so through endless critical and analytical scrutiny of the *Qur'an* and the *hadith*, fundamentalism has always been an important component of the Islamic tradition. However it is worth noting that most of the more recent reform movements have taken an exceptionally radical stance towards the vast canon of Islamic religious scholarship, so much so that they have rejected their predecessors conclusions virtually in their entirety, and instead of have sought to rely solely on the *Qur'an* itself together with the *sunna* of the Prophet himself and his four immediate “rightly guided” successors.
- 11.5. Yet although their approach may have involved the iconoclastic rejection of vast bodies of previously well-established analysis and scholarship which sought to define the rules of the *shari'a* with greater exactitude and certainty, what they nevertheless shared with those who focussed on the behavioural dimensions of the Prophet's *sunna* was a disinterest in, and in consequence an active hostility to, the more mystical and spiritual dimensions of the Islamic tradition. Indeed since the vast majority of new reformers were (or at least considered themselves to be) of urban rather than rural background, to be formally educated (very often in one or other of the natural sciences), strongly committed to “rationality” and

“progress”, and by that token only too conscious of the extent to which Euro-American critics were only too ready to dismiss all things Islamic as irrational and unprogressive, most were only too keen to suggest that one of the central causes of the Islamic world’s manifest subordination to the West was the extent to which the purity of the Prophet’s message had been suborned and undermined by the alien strands of mysticism which had crept into and finally overwhelmed popular Islam. Hence, for example, Islamic modernists in the Indian subcontinent routinely maintain that virtually all aspects of popular Islam — and certainly all its more spiritual dimensions — are so profoundly tainted by Hinduism that they should be abandoned forthwith.

- 11.6. But if modernist and hence so-called fundamentalist movements have little or no concern for the spiritual and mystical dimensions of their tradition, just what is it that provides their inspiration? Certainly they tend to place a good deal of emphasis on behavioural conformity, but in a sense which is subtly different from the long-standing *shari’a* tradition. My own impression is that rather than being driven forward by a textually inspired effort to follow the behavioural *sunna* of the Prophet in personal terms as closely as possible, the new reformers have very different objectives. In the first place their chosen behavioural strategies, most particularly in terms of dress and proclaimed ideological outlook, enables them to radically distance themselves from the Westernised modes of behaviour that they might otherwise have been expected to follow; in the second it also enables them to distance themselves from, and also to present a radical critique of, the preferred lifestyles of the local ruling elite, whether it be military/socialist, as in Egypt and Algeria, or modern/feudal, as in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf; thirdly it also enables them to distance themselves from the rural peasantry (who are very often their parent) whose practices can easily be dismissed as irrational, backward and un-Islamic.
- 11.7. What, though, is contemporary Islamic “fundamentalism” directed *towards*? My own view is that these new movements are above all a strongly political phenomenon, and that they have sprung to the fore in a very specific context: the collapse of more socialist-inspired efforts to resist Euro-American hegemony, as epitomised by such groups as the *ba’ath* parties in Iraq and Syria, as well as such groups as the PLO and the FLN. Yet although these socialist initiatives may indeed quite manifestly have failed, partly because they were eurocentrically inspired, and even more so because they have turned out to be more effective proponents of political and economic inequality than of social justice, it remains to be seen whether neo-fundamentalist solutions offer any brighter prospect for the mass of poor Muslims than those which their predecessors have delivered. In this respect the lessons of Iran appear to bode ill for the future.
- 11.8. Last but not least there is clearly a danger that one of most important dimensions of the Islamic tradition might suffer a total eclipse. Latin Christian observers have never found it easy to acknowledge that Islam might contain a powerful spiritualistic, and indeed a humanitarian, strand: they preferred at best to highlight its formal structures, and at worst to rework stale myths about Islam’s commitment to violence. Yet although Islam’s traditions of spirituality are still as vigorous as ever, especially amongst the rural poor who collectively constitute the vast majority of the world’s Muslims, those traditions are now

under increasingly vigorous attack, partly from the ever-present growth of Euro-American sponsored globalisation, and partly from within, as a new young elite seeks to press forward a counter-program of resistant “fundamentalism”. This battle is now joined in various guises throughout the Middle East, the Maghreb, as well as within and around the many Islamic communities which have now established themselves in Western Europe. It is far too early to predict what the outcome of these processes might be, not least because they are also likely to be very varied. But however fearful the West may be of the challenges which are likely to erupt — which will of course, only encourage the “fundamentalists” to rattle their swords ever more vigorously — my own expectation is that we have not seen the last of spiritual, mystical and humanistic Islam, however quiescent its proponents may currently seem.

Roger Ballard

Suggested Reading

- Ballard, Roger ‘Popular Islam in Northern Pakistan and its reconstruction in Britain’ ([website](#))
 Chittick, William *The Name and the Named* ([website](#))
 Eaton, Richard *Essays on Islam and Indian History*
 Lapidus, Ira *A History of Islamic Society* (Chapters on Sufism and South Asia)
 Pinto, D *The Piri-Muridi Relationship: a study of the Nizamuddin Dargah*
 Puri, J R *Bulleh Shah: the love-intoxicated iconoclast*
 Richards, John *The Mughal Empire*
 Rinehart, Robin “Interpretations of the poetry of Bullhe Shah” in *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, Vol 3 pp 45 - 64
 Rizvi, S A A *A History of Sufism in India*
 Sanyal, Usha *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India*
 Schimmel, A *As through a Veil*
 Schimmel, A *Islam In the Indian Sub-Continent*
 Shah, Waris *The Adventures of Hir and Ranjha*
 Titus, Murray *Indian Islam*