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American Sufis and American Islam: From Private Spirituality to the Public Sphere

Abstract: This chapter describes and explains how from the early 20th century until the present, Sufi movements in America evolved from offering universalist teachings that emphasized private personal spiritual development, to increasingly Islamic and public organizations.

Causes for this shift include demographic changes in the American population ranging from the immigration of Muslim Sufi teachers from the Middle East in the 1980s, to the rise of a current generation of young Muslim Americans, many of whose parents were immigrants. The pursuit of authentic Islamic knowledge, often identified with both *fiqh* (expertise in Islamic law) and *adab* (proper Islamic conduct), among this cohort of American Muslim youth, has evolved in a direction that increasingly embraces emotion and affect as factors that unite and mobilize Sufi-influenced Muslims who may be post-tariqa, but espouse many elements of Sufi teaching, vocabulary, and comportment.

The final section of the chapter explores the recent turn towards emotion and affect on the part of several Sufi-influenced movements based in America such as CelebrateMercy and the Ta'leef Connection. These groups emerged from the embrace of Islamic authenticity grounded in knowledge and performance of Islamic legal norms promoted by Sufi-oriented Muslim scholars popular among youth in the West and such as Hamza Yusuf Hanson, Abdal Hakim Murad, Umar Faruq Abdullah, and Habib Umar Jifri. While these emotive Sufi movements have some characteristics of counter-publics, they find increasing acceptance, integration, and even public influence within major American Muslim organizations, including the Islamic Society of North America.

Key words: Sufism in the West, Islam in America, counter-publics, Ta'leef Connection, affect, Islam and the public sphere.

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This article is intended to weave together a number of strands related to the study of Islam, and especially Sufism, in America. Furthermore – I would like to take on the challenge of the overarching conference title – “Islamic movements and the formation of ideologies in the Information Age” – to frame my data by considering how ideas motivate individuals to forms of either individual or collective action. This exploration will, in turn, engage more recent theoretical turns towards the role of affect and emotion in relationship to a public sphere. In the case of Sufi groups in the United States I will argue that there has been a shift over the past century from earlier groups constituted by individuals seeking private spiritual edification, to later (post-1980) movements based on identity and affiliation, and, most recently (post-2010), to more diffuse “publics” influenced by Sufi sensibilities who share ideas, information, and practices but – most of all – are united by affect and sentiment.

While Jürgen Habermas articulated the seminal notion of a rational public sphere, which he closely associated with the secularizing and individualizing process of the Enlightenment; “more recent scholars have attended as well to the work of “irrationality” – affect pleasure, and longing – in constructing meaning and constituting publics” [Griffith and McAlister, 2008, p. 9].

No doubt it is now standard to expect global dimensions to any discussion of a local phenomenon, and what happens in any one part of the world may be more or less relevant to other contexts. Thus, for example, the growth of popular interest in religion in post-Soviet Russia provides a bridge to considering comparable developments in the American context. At the same time the presence of a large immigrant Muslim community in the United States invites comparison to certain Western European situations. The “local” particularities, however, must also be considered. In this case it is clear that the relatively affluent American Muslim community and the differing post-colonial and neo-colonial situations in the United States and European countries significantly impact developments specific to the local context.

Let me briefly introduce the history and types of Sufi movements in America. Scholars differ on how to best categorize the differences and distinctions among them. I have in the past suggested a garden metaphor of “perennials”, “hybrids” and “transplants” in an attempt to capture their

distinctive approaches to Islamic identity [Hermansen, 1997]¹. The “perennials” of the Sufi garden are those movements in which the specifically Islamic identification and content of the movement have been de-emphasised in favour of a “perennialist”, “universalist” or “traditionalist” outlook². I am using the term “perennialist” in its broadest sense to refer to the idea that there is a universal, eternal truth that underlies all religions. The term “hybrids” designates those American Sufi movements that identify more closely with an Islamic source and content, yet also adapt to features of the American context and recruit significant numbers of American followers. In America these hybrid Sufi groups generally were founded and led by immigrant Muslims who were born and raised in Muslim societies³. Within those parameters, there are a wide range of responses and adaptations to the hybrid context in which they operate, for example, in the membership of the movements, incorporation of ethnic elements, integration of females, etc. “Transplants” in the American Sufi garden are groups of immigrant Sufis, generally co-ethnics, who practice and affiliate based on patterns in their native societies. One prominent example might be Senegalese Muridun in New York City, smaller groups of Afghans or Indian immigrants are found in a number of large American cities, and so on. This latter category will not be treated in this article.

“Perennial” Sufis

Earliest chronologically and still persisting are universal or perennial forms of Sufism. An Indian Sufi musician, Inayat Khan (d. 1927) first brought Sufi teachings that were adapted and influenced by movements such as Theosophy to the United States in 1912. The teachings and practices of the Inayati movements are and were drawn from diverse religious traditions, rather than limited to Islamic sources. American Sufis of the perennialist type remained relatively few and isolated until the 1960s and

¹ Other researchers, such as Alan Godlas and William Chittick have more bluntly and normatively designated American Sufi movements as “Islamic”, quasi-Islamic, or non-Islamic or as “drunken” vs. “sober”.

² Mark J. Sedgwick treats this movement in detail in: Sedgwick, 2004.

³ Although, to complicate the situation, we have the case of a hybrid Islamic movement such as the Darqawiyya/Habibiyya of which the founder, Ian Dallas (Abdal-Qadir) is British, as well as certain immigrant-led perennial movements.

70s when a new generation of Western seekers embraced these “eastern” esoteric teachings and practices in the context of New Age spiritual movements.

Other forms of Sufism that I consider “perennials” stress “traditionalism” based their understanding that a common source underlies all mystical enlightenment although they do not endorse religious eclecticism. The major source of universalizing influences on North American Sufism, more gnostic and intellectual in character, was “Perennialism” or “traditionalism”, as espoused by Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), a Swiss esotericist in the lineage of Rene Guenon (d. 1951). Schuon was an independent scholar of comparative religion who late in life settled in Bloomington, Indiana. Among his followers were a number of academics, and his successor as leader of this branch of a Sufi tariqa that Schuon established and called the Maryamiya, is the noted Iranian-American professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In addition to incorporating intellectual influences from classical Sufi figures such as Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) and al-Shadhili (d. 1258), the teachings of this order recognized a shared core of authentic tradition at the heart of all major religions in a concept known as the “transcendent unity of religion”¹. The intellectual traditionalism of Nasr is continued through his students, many of whom are professors of Islam such as Joseph Lumbard, Walid al-Ansari, and Ibrahim Kalin².

Hybrid Sufi Movements

The US Immigration Reform Act of 1965 opened the door to an influx of much larger numbers of immigrants from Muslim societies, which gradually began to affect the presence and character of Sufi activities in America. Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s “Islamic” Sufism was brought by visiting and immigrant Sufi leaders trained in the Muslim world. Prominent among such orders were the Helveti-Jerrahis led by Shaykh Mozaffer Ozak (d. 1985) from Istanbul and the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis led by Cypriot Shaykh Nazim and his Lebanese son-in-law, Shaykh Hisham Kabbani (b. 1945).

¹ For an extensive study of the history and teachings of Schuon and his successors see: Sedgwick, 2006.

² Nasr lists his students in: Nasr and Jahanbegloo, 2010, p. 74.

The core of each of these Sufi movements was Islamic, although individual members and even sub-branches continued to maintain eclectic or New Age beliefs and practices. During the 1980s and 1990s, these were the most vibrant and expanding Sufi groups in the US, and would include the Philadelphia-based movement of the Sinhalese teacher, Guru Bawa (d. 1984), whose followers likewise included both shari'a-oriented and mystically eclectic elements¹.

Post 9/11, in the new millennium, hybrid American Sufi movements and Sufism in general were often cast by public discourse in the role of representing the “good” or “moderate” Muslims. Evidence for this would be the courting of the political establishment by Shaykh Hisham Kabbani of the Naqshbandi-Haqqanis, illustrated by his meetings with American presidents and political leaders, consultations at the US State Department, and association with Neo-Cons and their think tanks and media outlets² during the Bush II era, as attested by copious Internet citations and other media sources regarding such activities, that take either supportive or antagonistic positions to the Shaykh and his Order [Damrel, 2006].

In general the membership, influence, and media prominence of hybrid Sufi groups has not increased and rather has declined in the US since the 1990s.

Authenticity Sufism 1995-2010

What I term “Islamic authenticity Sufism” began attracting larger numbers of the children of Muslim immigrants in their late teens, 20s and 30s during the mid 1990s. With the turn of the 21st century, the growth edge of Sufism in America was driven by new demographics. The spiritual seekers of the 1960s were graying, and the numbers of eclectic, New Age Sufis dwindling. At the same time immigration from the Muslim world continued to increase. Most foreign-born Muslims came to the United States after 2000 (40 %) or during the 1990s (31 %). An additional 16 % arrived in the 1980s. Just 12 % arrived before 1980 [Pew Research Center, 2011].

¹ The Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship has been studied more extensively and ethnographically than most American Sufi movements. For example by Gisela Webb [Webb, 2006] and Frank J. Korom [Korom, 2011].

² For example, Daniel Pipes [Pipes, 2000] and Michael J. Waller [Waller, 2002].

Many children of the earlier immigrant waves from the Middle East and South Asia began to take an interest in “authentic” Islam, as opposed to “movement” or political Islam. For this audience Sufi teachers who could speak in an American idiom while presenting Islamic credentials had the greatest appeal. National mainstream Muslim organizations such as ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) that had emerged from the influence and outlook of the global Islamic movement, rejected forms of Sufi practice such as *maulids*¹ and *tariqa* allegiance. However, they increasingly embraced forms of discourse and teachers who projected Islamic spiritual cultivation using Qur’anic concepts such as *ihsan* (righteousness) or purification of the *nafs* (soul)². Groups like Zaytuna, led by American convert, Hamza Yusuf Hanson, projected traditional Islamic knowledge as the basis of Muslim identity, and were able to appeal to mainstream American Muslims as well as those more Sufi-inclined individuals who yearned for “authentic” Islamic spirituality. Overall, the character of Sufism in the United States after the 1990s became more formally “Islamic” with the greater number of younger affiliates being drawn first to programs deepening traditional knowledge, including a strong influence of *fiqh* and conventional practice, which in some cases might lead to their affiliating with Sufi teachers and orders. A “bridge” generation of American Sufi converts to Islam who formulated an intellectually cogent and culturally appealing and sophisticated presentation of Sufism, was instrumental in this transition.

Nadia Inji Khan, in an article on religious literacy movements among young American Muslims during this period, mentions an early observation made by Hamza Yusuf that religious knowledge had lost its esteem in the Muslim world so that much of the scholarship and discourse from there reflected “ineptitude” [Khan, 2009, p. 124]³. Thus, part of the

¹ Devotional practices commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

² Major Islamic organizations, in particular the Islamic Society of North America, were initially inhospitable to any form of Sufism, but over time have become comfortable and even supportive of moral and psychological edification in Islamic terms that was traditionally the purview of Sufi theorists such as Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111). The title of Sherman Jackson’s recent translation of a Shadhili text, “Sufism for non-Sufis” [Jackson, 2012], is suggestive of the role of this integrative Sufism in the Muslim mainstream.

³ ALIM “empowering Muslim through education” was a program began in 1999 in Michigan as an offshoot of ISNA. Its project was conceived of as “Islamic literacy to empower us to bridge the racial sectarian and class divisions that divide us today” [Khan, 2009, p. 132].

mission of authenticity Islamic Sufism was to revive the quality and dignity of Islamic traditional knowledge.

The following statement from Abdal Hakim Murad (Tim Winter), an influential Sufi academic from Britain, argues for a revival of Sufism as a desiderata and could typify the position of Islamic authenticity Sufis in the West.

“At this critical moment in our history, the umma has only one realistic hope for survival, and that is to restore the ‘middle way’, defined by that sophisticated classical consensus which was worked out over painful centuries of debate and scholarship. That consensus alone has the demonstrable ability to provide a basis for unity. But it can only be retrieved when we improve the state of our hearts, and fill them with the Islamic virtues of affection, respect, tolerance and reconciliation. This inner reform, which is the traditional competence of Sufism, is a precondition for the restoration of unity in the Islamic movement. The alternative is likely to be continued, and agonizing, failure” [Murad, 2010].

Prominent American leaders of “authenticity Sufism” movements such as Hamza Yusuf Hanson (b. 1958) and Nuh Ha Mim Keller (b. 1954) – each of whom has contributed translations and commentary on the Islamic classics as well as having a presence of web and audio lecture archives – began to acquire larger followings among Sufi inclined American Muslim youth during the 1990s¹. Hanson is globally well-known and has been the subject of extensive media commentary² as well as a certain number of academic studies [Schmidt, 2004; Khan, 2009; Grewal, 2013].

Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller is an American-born Shadhili shaykh in a sub-lineage of the ‘Alawiyya, the Hashimiyya-Darqawiyya. Keller is a direct disciple and representative of the late Syrian shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Shaghouri (d. 2004)³. After briefly studying at the University of Chicago, Keller became a long time resident of Amman, Jordan. He visits the United States regularly, where he holds sessions for his American disciples. Many young American Muslims travel to Amman to immerse themselves in Sufi teachings of this order, pledging to conform to strict regulations such as abjuring coffee consumption, use of social media, or reading newspapers. Keller is an example of the first generation of American convert Sufis

¹ For more information on Keller see Marcia Hermansen [Hermansen, 2005], or Keller’s autobiography [Keller, 2011].

² For example: Abdo, 2007.

³ This Sufi teacher is apparently shared by Zaytuna leader, Zayd Shakir.

who studied Islamic and Arabic sources extensively and have their own followings of shari'a oriented Muslims.

Another Sufi lineage influential among young American seekers of Islamic spirituality and knowledge with a strong emphasis on Islamic practice is that of the Ba Alawiyya through Habib Ahmad Mashhur al-Haddad (d. 1995) and other ulama from Hadramaut, Yemen¹. A number of influential Western Sufi figures such as Hamza Yusuf, Umar Faruq Abdullah, Usama Canon, and Briton Timothy (Abd al-Hakim) Winter have been associated with this influence. After the passing of al-Haddad, his mantle devolved on Habib Umar ibn Hafiz al-Jifri (b. 1963), and some of the new generation of American Muslim youth scholars have studied at centers in Tarim, Yemen, including a madrasa for females².

While integrated in broader Muslim outreach, discourse, and institutions, these Sufi teachers, in particular, promoted education, an example being the Zaytuna College project of Hamza Yusuf and the now defunct Nawawi Foundation under Umar Faruq Abdullah³. Zaytuna was established as an institute began in 1996 and in 2009 became a full-fledged college established near San Francisco, which is now on the way to accreditation for offering a Bachelor of Arts degree in Islamic Studies, a development that has been welcomed both by the Muslim community and the American media as an important and innovative project [Grewal and Coolidge, 2013, pp. 259-60]. The Zaytuna style of education may be compared to the related Rihla program established by Hamza Yusuf and other American Muslim scholars in the 1990s at which young American Muslims engaged in intensive retreats at locations such as Dar al-Islam in New Mexico⁴. Among their inculcation into Islamic traditionalism was being encouraged to choose a madhhab (school of Islamic law) to follow. Khan suggests that the immersion experience of a Rihla intensive – “brings exotic experience home” for American Muslim youth unable to venture to Yemen or Mauritania. The context and immersion experience “legislates on every aspect of a students life” including dress, decorum, and choice of information or consumption [Khan, 2009, p. 141].

¹ An order studied historically by Anne K. Bang [Bang, 2003].

² Dar az-Zahra Institute for women, Tarim, Yemen.

³ An American Muslim scholar based in Chicago and trained at the University of Chicago who is part of the Sufi knowledge movement [Grewal and Coolidge, 2013, pp. 255-6].

⁴ The history of this institution and its Sufi roots are discussed in: Hermansen, 2000, pp. 184-5.

In the Zaytuna model emphasis is on purification of the soul – such that real crises are spiritual rather than political [Khan, 2009, p. 141]. Thus disciplining the self becomes the focus for this new cohort of American Muslim youth rather than the previous emphasis of maintaining distinctive Muslim identity based on resistance to non-Muslim culture. This is comparable to the manner in which mass Islamic movements in many parts of the Muslim world shifted their focus from direct confrontation with the state to individual grassroots projects of piety during this period.

This resonates with comments made by Rosemary Hicks in an article about Sufi-oriented Muslim in New York City post 9/11.

“In the closing years of the twentieth century and opening years of the twenty-first, disassociating from “cultural” and/or “political” Islam became an immediate concern for all American Muslims. For Sufis, this new imperative overlapped with previous pressures while also providing opportunities to form new alliances and answer longtime critics – all of which impacted how late twentieth-century practitioners in the United States enacted Islamic multicultural and cosmopolitan Americanness...

Proper American Islam was not political, in this definition, but personal. It was a “jihad against yourself”. This formulation of the “greater” individual jihad in keeping with American values of “peace, justice, and prosperity”, overlapped with and sometimes echoed various Sufi strands of individual practice and responsible Americanness...” [Hicks, 2008, p. 288].

Sociologically, I would characterize the groups around Hamza Yusuf and Umar Faruq Abdullah as world affirming while appealing to both mature and youth audiences. They have been received positively by Muslim organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America and within the American media, which generally portrays them as moderating influences.

Other forms of “authenticity Sufism” such as the Nuh Ha Mim Keller group¹ are more world-rejecting and isolationist with less outreach and publicity outside the confines of the group and less need to accommodate to American institutions and their legal and public frameworks. Yet even in the case of these Sufi groups, a concern with Islamic education can become a bridge to inclusion. For example, the Qasid Center for Arabic language

¹ For more information on Keller, see Marcia Hermansen [Hermansen, 2005], or Keller’s autobiography [Keller, 2011], as well as Zareena Grewal [Grewal, 2013]. In a different paper I also discuss a group following Shaykh Zulfikar, a Pakistani Naqshbandi, as a form of Deobandi Sufism [Hermansen, 2012].

study in Amman, closely linked to Keller's group, has achieved acceptance and recognition as a place to study Arabic in spheres much broader than American Sufi or even Muslim networks. US government programs such as Fulbright approve grantees studying there, despite the gender segregation and conservative atmosphere.

Unlike some of the earlier Sufi movements brought to America by immigrant Muslim shaykhs, Islamic "authenticity" Sufism does not inculcate specific cultural forms of dress or behaviors associated with specific Muslim cultures. It does, however, exhort and privilege broad and non-culture specific embodied Islamic disciplinary practices of gender segregation, modesty, and tastes in consumption and sources of information. In some cases attempts have been made to develop "American" forms of embodied Islam such as an American form of female hijab¹.

Sufism and American Islam since 2000: From Authenti"fiqh"ation to Affect

An edited volume of chapters on the academic study of Islam published in 2010 attempted to capture the essence of changes within the field during recent decades through its subtitle: "From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism" [Ernst and Martin, 2010]. In this article I suggest that a similar shift in the perceptions and publics of American Sufi movements occurred during the same period.

In order to argue that a trend towards affect is constituting a new type of American Sufi public (or counterpublic), I will use examples of several groups that have arisen from the Islamic authenticity/Zaytuna form of Sufism, but that have subsequently taken on their own distinct missions and styles.

I will start by paraphrasing an anecdote quoted by Charles Hirschkind in his book on the role of Islamic cassettes and their reception in Egypt during the 1990s in constituting "counterpublics". Hirschkind describes how an Islamist preacher admonishes his audience that if someone offers you a cigarette from his pack – don't insult him or condemn his smoking – greet him politely and thank him [Hirschkind, 2006]. The intent of this

¹ The writings of Umar Faruq Abd-Allah on Islam and culture are relevant here, for example, "Islam and The Cultural Imperative" [Abd-Allah, 2006].

exemplary comportment (*adab*) is ultimately *da'wa* (inviting the person to your view and practice of the religion) – it is about changing “him”.

In order to illustrate the shift to affective Sufism, I now cite a more recent but similar anecdote from a talk by Shaykh Habib Ali al-Jifri, a Ba Alawi Shaykh popular among the new cohort of American Muslim youth in the context of a talk that Shaykh Habib gave exhorting his audience to remain humble despite possessing a lot of Islamic knowledge.

In this case the scenario presented is that as you are exiting the mosque after attending his lecture a young person passes by in a car playing the radio loudly blasting “dirty and disturbing” unsuitable music. You are admonished to smile and greet him instead of condemning his behavior and taste¹.

My contention is that Habib’s version of the anecdote, while structurally similar to that of the Islamist preacher, focuses the attention on “you” – controlling *your* affect, state and *adab* as arising from your Islam knowledge.

Recent anthropological studies of Islamic revival in the Middle East employ critical theory in the lineage of Foucault, Talal Asad and Pierre Bourdieu in discussing the importance of discipline, practice, and embodiment for members of such movements. I am thinking in particular of the work of Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood on Egyptian pietists [Mahmood, 2005], and of Laura Deeb on Hizbullah women in Lebanon. Deeb, for example, presents the idea of an “affective community” [Deeb, 2006] operating in an “enchanted modern” in which both material and spiritual progress are necessary. In such communities everyday practices inculcate and demonstrate both conscious and conscientious commitment of modern selves [Ibid, p. 5].

These theoretical moves towards acknowledging the role of affect and enchantment in motivating individuals who are part of more diffuse associations are echoed in the works of the historian of American religion, Melani McAlister, whose concept of “affective community” combines religious feelings and public practice as she analyzes an “enchanted internationalism” [McAlister, 2008, p. 878] among youthful evangelical Christians in the US [Ibid, p. 879].

All of these cases, in turn, challenge the secularization hypothesis and Max Weber’s view of a disenchanted modern world. In a disenchanted modernity meaning is said to no longer reside in the axiomatically shared

¹ “Sincerity in seeking piety” [Sultan, 2012]. From youtube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7UIP55bD4g> (accessed 24 October 2013).

and publicly inscribed beliefs and understandings that constitute an epistemic and moral community [Jenkins, 2000]. One aspect of reenchancement on the part of affective publics such as those of Sufi-influenced knowledge seekers is reinstating moral and emotional community through both individual disciplines and public forms of engagement and consumption.

In response to the shattering of the moral, cognitive, and interpretive unity that Weber believed characterized the enchanted pre-modern world-view, “the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations”¹.

Sufi-influenced publics aim to retrieve or revive the enchanted world by collectively performing the transcendent and the intimate², in other words, by contesting the retreat of the sacred from public life.

Quoting Hirschkind:

“Since the rise of modernization theory in the 1960s up through present concerns with globalization, a growing body of anthropological and sociological scholarship has explored the impact of modern media technologies on religious practice. Scholars have frequently approached this topic in terms of a polarity between what are assumed to be two contradictory processes: the deliberative and the disciplinary. Analyses focusing on the deliberative aspect have emphasized the possibilities of argument, contestation, and dialogue that have been afforded by the advent of universal modern literacy, the diffusion of printed texts, and the operation of electronic mass media” [Hirschkind, 2001, p. 3].

“...Enabled in part by the mediatization of sermons on cassette, the norms governing sermon practice have been extended by the da’wa movement to the dialogical context of public discourse.

Within this arena, speech is deployed in order to construct moral selves, to reshape character, attitude, and will in accord with contemporary standards of pious behavior. The efficacy of an argument here devolves not solely on its power to gain cognitive assent on the basis of its superior reasoning, as would be the case in some versions of a liberal public sphere, but also on

¹ Weber, 1946, p. 155. Quoted in Jenkins, 2000, p. 15.

² Melanie McAlister, in her analysis, cites Lauren Berlant’s reflections on intimate publics according to which, “Certain kind of publics are linked by their promises of intimacy – linking of self, society, and sentiment. People are linked through cultural products that circulate among them. Consumers of particular stuff already share a worldview and emotional knowledge” [Berlant, 2008, p. viii]. In this case these “intimate” publics identify without having actually met, thus the countercultural aspect may work, but is complicated by the possibility of both actual and virtual sharing in an information and social media age.

its ability to move the moral self toward correct modes of being and acting” [Ibid, p. 19].

Extending Hirschkind’s analysis – which after all took place in the 1990s, I suggest that the groups that I am theorizing about in this article may constitute affective Sufi influenced publics – or counterpublics – that embrace similar projects of disciplining and motivating the self, and likewise move beyond the deliberative discursive power of knowledge and argument. The new piece to consider is how “information” and its delivery facilitates their constituting a public and motivates affective Sufis toward “moral action” (ihsan) and proper comportment (adab).

My final examples of new American Sufi-influenced publics/counterpublics, include emergent groups such as the Ta’leef Connection and CelebrateMercy¹ and might extend more broadly to other youth-oriented Muslim groups such as Seekers Hub² and Reviving the Islamic Spirit³ who represent the next logical iteration of Zaytuna’s stance on Sufism.

According to one of my interviewees, “Ta’leef and Celebratemeracy could be characterized as outgrowths or logical developments of Zaytuna’s (i.e. Hamza Yusuf Hanson’s) vision of Sufism, i.e. that Sufism is an Islamic discipline of learning that is independent of the tariqa/zawiyya structure. Figures such as Hamza Yusuf, Tim Winter, etc. made the case that Sufism was a lost aspect to Islamic practice that needed revival. The natural question for listeners was, ‘Where do I sign up?’”⁴

While Hamza Yusuf was not calling on people to embrace tariqa-Sufism, he contributed to creating the conditions wherein more individuals became receptive to it. When Sufi instructors such as Shaykh Nuh Keller, Syrian Shaykh Muhammad Yaqoubi, or the Ba Alawiyya, appeared, Hamza Yusuf had already prepared an audience to which their teachings could appeal.

Usama Canon, the prime mover of the Ta’leef Connection, was a

¹ CelebrateMercy’s official website is available at: <http://www.celebratemeracy.com>. Almost 500,000 people like the group on Facebook.

² Seekers Hub official website, available at: <http://seekershush.org/#sthash.411TuDag.dpbs>. The group is organized by Faraz Rabbani, a Hanafi scholar from Canada affiliated with the Shaykh Nuh group. Rabbani was involved with the Internet fiqh sites Sunni Path and Qibla, along with Qibla’s previous iteration – “Seekers Guidance”.

³ Studied by Mahdi Tourage [Tourage, 2013].

⁴ E-mail communication. 24 October 2013.

disciple of a Moroccan shaykh but eventually joined up with Habib Umar¹. Another Sufi teacher, Yahya Rhodus, spent over a decade studying under Habib Umar and Habib Ali. The presence of Habib Umar bin Hafiz looms large within the Ta'leef Connection – for example, he authored the milad that is recited in their gatherings².

This leads to the observation that collective practice among such groups, while varying widely, often includes elements of devotion to the Prophet Muhammad. While the affective mood of Zaytuna could be characterized as nostalgia for the Islamic/Sufi tradition, the mood of the latest cohort of affective American Sufis could be characterized as a quest for wells of spirituality abiding both in the remoter global reaches of Islam, and now able to be accessed in new cosmopolitan urban spaces.

The Ta'leef Connection has been described as inhabiting a “very urban space” where presenters adopt “hipster dress” as opposed to thawbs and robes³. The idea of getting away from the suburbs or affluent gated communities also reflects a new imperative of being engaged and relevant. A repeated trope of the Ta'leef Collection is that it serves to provide a “third space” besides the home or the mosque⁴. The “third space” concept circulates in post-colonial and post-modern critical theory and has been explicitly taken up in studies of American Muslim youth cultures⁵, and now by Sufi-influenced publics themselves in the case of Ta'leef.

A contemporary construction of the three “spaces” is that one space is the domestic sphere: the family and the home⁶. The second space is the sphere of civic engagement including school, work and other forms of public participation. Set against these is a Third Space where individual, sometimes professional, and sometimes transgressive acts are played out: where people let their “real” selves show⁷.

Ta'leef Connection further mounts a “Mu'allif” Mentorship program that inculcates Ta'leef practices – such as how to be a servant to the community.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cited repeatedly in Ta'leef Connection discourse, for example, Mustafa Davis [Davis, 2011].

⁵ According to Shabana Mir, Muslim Student Associations on college campuses create a “third space” where they can produce “discourses as sites of resistance and negotiation” [Mir, 2006].

⁶ Based on Katie Walsh [Walsh, 2006, p. 125].

⁷ Based on the Wikipedia article “Third space theory”, available at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Third_Space_Theory (accessed 2 December 2013).

Examples given in an Internet article advocating the Mu'allif Program indicate broad non-judgmental acceptance and porous boundaries.

“How would I respond to any of these [situations]? How would our local mosques and community leaders respond?

Scenario 1: A new convert to Islam is worried that if he tells his Hindu family about his new religion, he will be kicked out of the house and will become homeless.

Scenario 2: A transgendered activist is interested in Islam and asks you if he would be welcome in a Muslim space, so he can learn more about the religion.

Scenario 3: An uncle, who is well known in the community, confides to you about his alcoholism. He is unsure about where to go for help and says he is on the verge of divorce because of his addiction.

These are simple examples of the many existing social issues that a Muslim community may face. In many of our communities, our leaders are not equipped with the cultural sensitivity, openness and training to respond with empathy, compassion and practicality to help such cases. Whether it is a sister facing domestic violence or sexual abuse, or a convert brother who is completely isolated, our spaces are not always welcoming or safe enough to have these conversations in the first place.

There is a dire need to bring about a paradigm shift and to establish new norms in caring for our communities and openly acknowledging our issues, in order for us to become a healthier community” [Van Overloop, 2013].

Ta'leef in itself is an affective term. “Ta'lif al-qulub” in early Islamic history was the attitude to be adopted towards new and non-Muslims in order to bring them into the fold. The Arabic root “a-l-f” has connotations of “becoming familiar, habituated, on intimate terms with”, and also of “becoming domesticated”. This resonates with Ta'leef Connection attitudes of being relaxed about boundaries and being extra nice to newcomers and strangers. In fact, while billed as a space for converts, many more attendees at Ta'leef events are born Muslims. Some of these features and attitudes suggest that Ta'leef Connection could be considered as constituting a “counterpublic” – that remains aware of its non-dominant public role while embracing its transformative potential within Muslim and non-Muslim contexts.

Another example of affective Sufi-influenced groups is the coalition CelebrateMercy that organizes global mawlid – celebrations of the life of the Prophet Muhammad – featuring the same Sufi-influenced scholars cited during this article expounding on themes related to the sira or

biography of the Prophet. CelebrateMercy is perhaps not as directly “Sufi” in that there are no explicit practices that would define the group as such, still the general orientation of those involved is heavily informed by Zaytuna’s (i.e. Hamza Yusuf’s) and Habib Ali Jifri’s new media approach to affective Islamic outreach.

The virtual public drawn into these activities is encouraged to organize group viewings of the webcasts, while promotional videos for the group on the Internet display maps demonstrating the global reach of the affective network as real time viewers click to highlight their respective locations on a map of the world. A prominent slogan of CelebrateMercy is, “How can you love someone you do not know” (the Prophet) – again suggesting the shift to affect that is grounded in or emerges from a particular sort of “knowledge”¹.

Noted theorist of counterpublics, Michael Warner, observed that:

“...a public organizes itself independently of state institutions, law, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church. If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state” [Warner, 2002, p. 51].

On a final note, I raise the question of whether these emerging Sufi-influenced groups constitute affective publics or counterpublics. While there are diverse forms of “post-tariqa” Sufism globally and in the West, only some might be considered as representing affective networks of taste, consumption, and affiliation². The delicate, and possibly ambiguous element is the extent to which a group is conscious of its non-dominant or marginalized status within a broader public sphere.

Among theorists there is no consensus regarding what exactly constitutes or defines a counterpublic as opposed to a public. Are counterpublics simply non-dominant groups such as (at least at one point in Western history) females or gays? Such reflections naturally emerge in response to criticisms of Habermas’ conception of the Enlightenment public sphere as being presented as much more inclusive than it actually could have been.

¹ CelebrateMercy youtube promotional video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_RQVwCg6II (viewed 23 October 2013).

² For example, some branches of the Turkish Nur communities, such as the Gulen movement, might fit the criteria for being affective counterpublics.

In addition to naming the “outsiders” who might constitute them, theorists of counterpublics suggest that these communities, rather than being Habermasian “public” spheres for discussion adjudicated by discursive reason and argument outside of the hegemony of church or state norms, function instead to provide spaces that are genuinely transformative because they are sites of affect and embodiment.

Again drawing on Michael Warner for a characterization of counterpublics:

“This necessity of risked estrangement, though essential to all publics, becomes especially salient in counterpublic discourse and is registered in its ethical-political imagination.

Dominant publics are by definition those that can take their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy. Counterpublics are spaces of circulation in which it is hoped that the poesis of scene making will be transformative, not replicative merely” [Warner, 2002, p. 88].

This formulation leaves us with further issues to address regarding the new forms of affective, Sufi-influenced, associations emerging in the contemporary West, and to an extent, globally. Are the individuals constituting these networks “non-dominant” due to their identification(s) as Muslims in the West, as Sufi-inclined (minority) Muslims, or as members of urban youth cultures?

Charles Hirschkind described a public as “subject to authority towards a uniform model of moral behavior” [Hirschkind, 2006, p. 105]. While affective Sufi-influenced groups discussed in this article may be potentially more open or transgressive than some forms of Muslim discourse and affiliation, it is clear that traditional knowledge and symbols still function powerfully in conveying authority to the leaders and spokespersons within these communities. Therefore, there is a tension or oscillation between conformity and resistance to tradition. It is ultimately the delivery and experience of tradition as primarily affective that sets these groups apart from a Habermasian public, and may allow us to consider them “counterpublics”. For Sufism, however, the appeal to something beyond reason is hardly novel, leaving us to wonder whether it is, in fact, the quest for post-modern reenchancement, both in the West and more broadly,

that provides an opening for such Sufi-influenced reengagements with Islam, especially within Muslim youth cultures.

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