



THE FORMATION OF SUFISM IN THE WEST, 1910-1933 TRANSCENDENTALISM, THEOSOPHY AND SUFISM

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ABSTRACT: *This article discusses the evolution of Sufism in the West, where it has moved beyond Muslim communities to attract native Western followers. It highlights how Sufi orders adapt to Western cultural contexts through hybrid, transplanted, and perennial forms. Scholars such as Pnina Werbner and Marcia Hermansen explore how Sufi networks transcend ethnic and political boundaries. The influence of New Age spirituality, neo-Sufism, and key figures like Inayat Khan and Martin Lings is also examined. The universal values of love, tolerance, and unity help Sufism gain popularity in pluralistic Western societies.*

KEYWORDS: *Sufism, Western Islam, diaspora hybrid Sufism, neo-Sufism, perennialism, spiritual networks*

As you know, in the twentieth century, Sufism went far beyond the "Islamic world" and over time turned into an integral element of the Muslim religious environment in Western countries. As the British researcher Pnina Werbner points out: "Sufi cults are organized around living or deceased saints like ta'ifa, regional cults organized largely according to the same pattern as other regional cults." As Werbner points out, various Sufi cults interpenetrate one another, rather than forming their own contiguous, limited territories: "They leap over major political and ethnic boundaries, creating their own sacred topographies and flows of goods and people." This is, in general terms, the ideal model for the spread of Sufi cults in Muslim-majority countries and in the West. At the same time, the spread of Sufism in the West has its own distinctive features, one of which is to go beyond the Muslim diasporas by converting to Islam and attracting indigenous Europeans to communities².

Katarina Raudwere and Leif Stenberg emphasize that the Sufi communities of the West are an important link in the complex interaction between diasporas and metropolises, and also act as channels of cultural influence in a global perspective. These researchers note that Sufi tariqas have always been transnational network institutions within which the movement of people, goods, ideas, and cultural artifacts was carried out. Currently, these networks also play a role in maintaining social and kinship ties, as well as business ties between Muslim diasporas and their countries of origin.

² Oleg Yarosh, "Globalization of redemptive sociality: Transnational Sufi networks al-Akhabash and Haqqania in Western Asia and Central-Eastern Europe", (Zvezda 2019): – P 23.



On the other hand, Ron Jeeves quite categorically argues that Sufism in the West functions "not so much as the transmission of mysticism within Islam, which can turn into universal mysticism, which Western seekers strive for, but as an intermediate mechanism, primarily associated with the transmission of cultural and religious traditions." In Western Sufi communities, customs and practices characteristic of the area of origin (as a rule, characteristic of the rural socio-cultural environment) are duplicated, their "mirror image" is formed³.

Sufi tariqas today are one of the tools for attracting the indigenous inhabitants of Western countries to Islam, which is facilitated by the aura of "mysticism" surrounding them, familiarization with the "innermost", the cult of "divine love", which arose, to a large extent, thanks to the efforts of orientalist scientists and became widespread in the works of Western esotericists and "traditionalists". At the same time, Sufi tariqas in the West attract not only seekers of "enlightenment", rushing between different spiritual traditions and teachers, but also those who sincerely strive to radically change their own way of life and worldview through religious conversion.

American researcher Larry Poston believes that Sufism plays an important role in the spread of Islam in the West and characterizes it as "interpersonal missionary work", thanks to which those who accept Islam individually get the opportunity to prepare themselves for the conversion of others. Dutch researcher Karin Van Nieuwerk shares this point of view, emphasizing that often converts turn to Sufism and then convert to Islam. In turn, the Italian sociologist Stefano Allievi points out that books about Sufism play an important role in attracting Western adherents⁴.


The famous American Islamic scholar Ira Lapidus emphasizes that the basis of Muslim civilization is based on the "network principle", since it initially developed with the help of networks of Muslim scholars, Sufi tariqas and merchants who operated outside the borders of individual states. Moreover, the Muslim communities themselves represented "networks of relations between its constituent groups."

American researcher Marcia Hermansen offers the following classification of Western Sufi movements:

- "Perennialists": consider Sufism as a universal mystical tradition outside the context of Islam or rethink it in the context of the ideas of traditionalism (R. Guenon et al.);
- "Hybrid communities": have a great connection with the Islamic tradition, however, adapt it to the Western European socio-cultural context and have many followers from among Europeans.
- "Transplant communities": formed mainly by immigrants from the diaspora, reproduce socio-cultural patterns and religious traditions of their countries of origin.

³ John G. Bennett, author: Biography of John Bennett (London: Turnstone Books, 1975), pp. 139– 144.

⁴ John G. Bennett, Author: Biography of John Bennett (London: Turnstone Books, 1975), pp. 300-310.



This typology is based on the attitude to the Islamic normative tradition and practices, which makes it possible to distinguish more or less "traditional" communities in the Western Sufi environment⁵.

In another work, Hermansen proposes the following typology of global Sufi cults: "theirs", which originated and are based in Muslim societies and spread through missionary work, and "ours", whose center is located in Western countries. Among these latter, the researcher identifies the following categories: eclectic Sufi movements; communities led by a convert sheikh of Western origin; communities led by a sheikh from a Muslim country.

One of the characteristic features of religious movements in the West in the 70s and 80s of the last centuries is the emergence of "ideological communities" or communes where the followers of a spiritual leader lived together in a remote area and often also ran a collective farm. The largest number of such communes belonging to new religious movements arose in the United States, where such "ideological communities" have been traditionally widespread since the 19th century, as well as hippie communes enjoyed considerable popularity since the late 60s - early 70s of the last centuries⁶.

A significant part of the members of the Western Sufi communities came from an environment associated with the New Age movement. Thomas Lukmann examines this movement in the context of the "privatization of religion" and the crisis of traditional religious institutions in the West, and emphasizes that this movement combines various psychological, therapeutic, magical and paranascientific currents and practices, reformats them and offers them for individual consumption based on selective syncretism. In turn, Paul Hilar believes that the "New Age" should not be considered only as one of the forms of consumerism based on the consumption of "spiritual goods", since it is associated with certain ethical norms that affect the worldview and value system of its participants⁷.

In addition to Sunni Sufism, a model of Sufism emerged, later known as Islamic. Philosophical Sufism focuses on the study of the spiritual meaning of Islam, on the construction of a metaphysical foundation, on the existence of a relationship between the existence of the Creator and His creation. This type of mystics tries to decipher the absoluteness of God as a Single Reality. This explains the existence of nature as an expression. Nature in this type of Sufism is a manifestation of the existence of God.


Referring to the principles of Sufism, it can be argued that the teachings of Sufism resemble the principles of neo-Sufism. Neo-Sufism is understood as an attempt to combine Sufi values with worldly life. The practice of neo-Fascism, especially in modern life, is aimed at forming an active attitude of Muslims to worldly problems and reviving a positive worldview.

The followers of this trend mainly consist of immigrants and people who were born in a new area and socialized in a new environment. Neo-Sufism as a model of Sufism is an

⁵ "Shamyl," The New American Cyclopaedia, vol. 14 (New York: D. Appleton, 1869), – P 558–59.

⁶ Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan", ed. Zii Inayat Khan (New Lebanon, New York: Omega Publications, 2001), – P 240

⁷ Ahatanhel Y. Krymsky, "Myuridizm," Entsiklopedicheskiy slovar' Brokgauza i Yefrona (St. Petersburg, 1890–1907).



effort to enhance understanding of the esoteric dimension that is still controlled by Islamic law. For example, in Indonesia, Hamka is considered a figure balancing the demands of modernity and Sufism and succeeded in popularizing the idea of modernized Sufism. The model of Hamki Sufism is based on the desire to revive moral values⁸.

According to him, people are moral and ethical beings based on a person's ability to distinguish good from bad. Humans are free creatures and can do as they wish. However, with strong intellectual abilities, people should be guided by revelation. The observance of morality is important in the Islamic religious system.

Moral strengthening is achieved by reviving Sufism in life. Thus, in terms of the content of the teachings, there are similarities between the hybrid model of Sufism and neo-Sufism or modern Sufism propagated by modern Sufism activists such as Hamka in Indonesia. While the practice of a hybrid model of Sufism in the West can be found in the practice of Sufism of the followers of the Naqshabandiya Haqqani order.

Followers of this Tariqa also practice the principles of hybrid Sufism, adapting the practice and understanding of Sufism along with the dynamics of human life. People are not prevented from living their worldly life, although they do not obey this worldly life. The second form of the Sufism model that is developing in the West is the transplantation Model of Sufism. The transplant group consists of Diaspora Sufis who are Sharia-oriented and seek to practice and imitate the original practices of the Sufi tradition⁹.

Sufism is practiced by Sufi groups who strive to preserve the authenticity of Sufism in its original form. This understanding of Sufism was brought by Muslim immigrants from their places of origin, and then developed in the diaspora and still remains traditional. The hybrid group was more open than the transplanted one. Tariqa al-Akhhbash is an example of a transplant type of Sufism. The third model of Sufism that has been developed in the West is the model of eternal Sufism.


Eternal Sufism is a teaching of Sufism that adheres to the eternal concept of truth, which is the basis and framework of all religions or is known as eternal wisdom. Eternal wisdom or also called eternal philosophy is a philosophical concept that has existed since pre-modern times, which is claimed to still be relevant today. The eternal concept in philosophy and Sufism, at least, considers the problem of the existence and reality of God as an Absolute Substance. Pernal also discusses religious pluralism as a reality that cannot be avoided in human life¹⁰.

The basic concept of eternal Sufism is based on an eternal philosophical ontology, namely that truth is indivisible and absolute. From this one truth, other truths flow. Eternal wisdom requires that adherents of religions should be open (inclusive), not closed (exclusive) in relation to the differences that exist between religions. In the eternal context, there is only one absolute truth. The truth emanating from the One (God) radiates many

⁸ Griffith, Frank. The philosophical theology of Al-Ghazali. (New York: Oxford University Press.,2009.)

⁹ McGinn, Bernard. The foundations of mysticism: from the origins to the fifth century. (New York: Crossroads, 2002.)

¹⁰ Inayat Khan. Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan. 1923; (Publishing house "East-West", 1979;)



other truths, like sunlight that falls on leaves of various colors, and then the leaves turn red when the rose receives the sun's rays.

The teaching of eternal Sufism is considered from the point of view of the great Sufi from the very beginning. West, Martin Lings is the teaching of Sufism, which combines three main things, namely: the value of primordialism, universalism and essentialism. Of the three fundamental principles, universalism is the main characteristic of the eternal teachings. In this context, the eternal doctrine is the doctrine of eternity. Martin Lings gives an idea of the nature of eternal Sufism, giving examples of several buildings that differ in shape and size. Despite the fact that each building has a different shape, in general, the purpose of the building is the same, namely, it serves as a container that provides protection and brings beauty to those who see it¹¹.

Thus, according to Martin Ling, if you look at the goals of various religions, you can see that, especially divine religions, universally they all pursue the same goal, namely, to know God and get closer to Him. However, in terms of shape, each building has its own shape that distinguishes it from others: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, although coming from the same source, have different shapes. In this context, religions are different and cannot be united or become one. This similarity is observed only on the inner level of religion (esoteric), and not on the exoteric level (worship and revelation), which is exceptional.

William K. Chittick, the teachings of Ibn al-Arabi Sufism are becoming increasingly in demand in the West, especially after the publication of two works by Henry Corbin on Ibn al-Arabi and Toshiko Izutsu "Sufism and Taoism: a comparative study of key Philosophical Concepts."¹²


Based on the above description, Sufism with unchanging patterns or characteristics is generally easier to adapt and accept by people in the Western world. It is based on the values of tolerance, openness and universality contained in the teachings of Sufism. The pluralism of Western society is certainly a challenge for Islamic science. Thanks to a consistent approach that prioritizes efforts to find common ground rather than differences, it is more easily perceived by different communities.

The Sufi organization of Inayat Khan. An official Sufi organization was established between 1915 and 1917, as Inayat felt that "in the absence of an organization [those who were interested in his message] had nothing to unite, so many disappointed lefts and became scattered. You can't pick flowers without a basket." This organization was called the "Sufi order", and not the "Order of purity", as would be customary in the Muslim world. Perhaps Inayat believed that such a definition as "clean" was incompatible with the more universalist understanding of Sufism expressed in the Sufi Message¹³. By 1918, the Sufi order had branches in London and five provincial cities in England. As Zia Inayat Khan has

¹¹ Inayat Khan, Biography of Pir-o-Murshid Inayat Khan (Germany: Centrum Universal, 2005), – P151.

¹² Idris Shah, Sufis (London: Idris Shah Foundation, 2014),

¹³ Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan", ed. Zii Inayat Khan (New Lebanon, New York: Omega Publications, 2001), – P 389.



shown, this expansion took place mainly through theosophical channels. It also reflected Inayat's success as a lecturer. If he followed the advice, he once gave Martin, which seems likely, he did not plan his lectures in advance, but began by imagining the figure of the Prophet, and then simply let the lecture go by itself, trying never to say what he did not feel, and never just said what in his opinion, the audience wanted to hear him.

He also tried not to use the word "Sufism" too often, never to challenge or claim superiority over any other "teaching, or faith, or system accepted by people," and not to "limit Sufism to any faith, creed, community."¹⁴

Some of Inayat's followers had good connections in English society. From about 1916, his most famous follower was Lucy Goodenough, the daughter of Lieutenant General Sir William Hawley Goodenough, who supported Inayat in London society, introducing him to such luminaries as poet laureate Robert Bridges. Goodenough and other followers also raised money in support of Inayat. At that time, his most important sponsor was Margaret.

Skinner, a wealthy mill owner, rented him a large house in central London at 29 Gordon Square (now part of University College London). However, in 1920, after a report appeared in the Times about the official opening of the hunka (lodge) in Gordon Square, relations between Inayat and Skinner soured, leaving Inayat in debt for unpaid rent for Gordon Square. This may have been the reason for the sudden departure of the family and some of the leading followers, including Goodenough, to France. In 1933, after Inayat's death, he published a book called Islamic Sufism, in which he directly criticized the universalist concept of Sufism promoted by the Sufi movement¹⁵.


"A Sufi must necessarily be a Muslim," the Shah wrote, and Sufism should not be confused with "such non-Islamic movements, which are called Sufism due to complete ignorance." The Sufi movement has never achieved the scope or importance that some had obviously hoped for. Most likely, just as the Theosophical Society could have grown to the size of the Mormon Church, but did not do so, so the Sufi movement and the Church of All Saints could have grown to the size of the Theosophical Society but did not do so. This was partly due to the early death of Inayat, who obviously had the charisma that his brothers lacked.

Inayat's attempts to legitimize his teaching were only partially successful at best. Despite the fact that the Sufi movement never reached the scale and importance that some had hoped for, Inayat and his followers firmly established Western Sufism. Their universalist understanding of Sufism, to some extent consonant with the Indian experience, but also based on the Western understanding of Sufism, traced here, as it was at New York University in 1912 and reinforced by former theosophists among the followers of Inayat, is firmly rooted¹⁶.

¹⁴ Iqbal Ali Shah, "Islamic Sufism" (1933; Delhi: "Idara-i adabiyat-i Delhi", 1979), – P 14.

¹⁵ Raden Ayou Jodjana, "From 'Autobiography,'" in A Pearl in Wine: Essays on the Life, Music and Sufism of Hazrat Inayat Khan, ed. Zia Inayat-Khan (New Lebanon, NY: Omega Publications, 2001), – P 389.

¹⁶ Inayat Khan, "The Art of Being and Becoming" (New Lebanon, New York: Omega, 1982), – P 4, 8-9, 41.



Thus, the question remains as to what Inayat himself actually believed. It is likely that his ideas evolved over time. In America in 1911, he was a musician who was happy to talk about Sufism to those who were interested and gave the order of Chishti to an enthusiastic Jewish woman from San Francisco, at the same time encouraging her to practice Islam, if not to change her public religious affiliation. In Europe in the 1920s, he was a successful spiritual teacher with a wealth of knowledge and experience, as the Sangats and Sangiths clearly show. Earlier, he came to the correct conclusion that if he tried to preach Islam to Westerners, he would achieve nothing, and that people would listen to his Sufi message only if he made it universal. However, perhaps his last point of view was emanationist universalism.

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