

# PRESENT AND POTENTIAL IMPACT OF THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF ISLAM ON CONTEMPORARY MUSLIMS: FROM GHAZALI TO GÜLEN

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## Abstract

Western analysts of trends in the contemporary Islamic world often overestimate the impact of contemporary Sufi orders and/or underestimate the impact of the spiritual tradition of Islam. Among the elements of the spiritual tradition conducive to religious pluralism is the ‘mirror’ concept: every human is seen as a mirror of God in three aspects: reflecting the attributes and names of God as His work of art, reflection through dependence on God, and reflection through actions God commands or commends. Since only the last aspect is voluntary, every human, regardless of creed, is a mirror of God in at least the first two aspects. This is a potent argument for peaceful coexistence in religious diversity. The perspective of the spiritual tradition is emphatically inclusive and compassionate and naturally lends itself to non-violence, going beyond mere tolerance to hospitality and friendship. There are important impediments that prevent this perspective from having a greater impact: (1) the literalist opposition to flexible interpretation of concepts from the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition, and the wide definition of innovation or heresy (*‘bid`a’*); (2) deviations of some Sufi orders and subsequent criticisms by orthodox Muslims; and (3) the impact of the politicisation of religion by some groups and political moves by certain Sufi orders.

This paper argues that the only approach that has a chance of influencing the majority of contemporary Muslims in positive ways without being open to criticism is the ‘balanced’ spiritual tradition, after the style of the Companions, sometimes called *tasawwuf*, which strives to harmonise the outer dimensions of Islamic law and worship with the inner dimension of spiritual disciplines firmly rooted in the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition. This paper will present an analysis of this ‘balanced’ spiritual tradition in Islam, from Ghazali, through Rumi, to Gülen.

The emergence of M. J. Rumi as the best selling love poet in the U.S., thanks in part to the compilations of C. Barks<sup>1</sup>, has drawn attention to the spiritual tradition of Islam. El-Zein<sup>2</sup> talks about commercialization of Rumi's works and "how his work is taken nowadays out of the Muslim Sufi tradition into an elusive spiritual movement" which the author calls the "New Sufism". The interest in Sufism was renewed after the tragedy of 9/11 as both Muslims and non-Muslims sought to highlight the inclusive, peace and love-focused essence of this faith<sup>3</sup>.

Sufism is sometimes called the esoteric dimension of Islam, as opposed to the exoteric dimension of Islamic law<sup>4</sup>. It does not take long for any researcher of the Sufi tradition to recognize how overloaded the term *Sufism* has become, in part due to its long and complex history and its geographical dispersion. Like an umbrella term over a giant field, it covers various traditions, sub-traditions and branches thereof, that share many essential concepts and differ significantly in others. In recognition of this fact, the late Anne-Marie Schimmel, the noted scholar of Rumi, avoids a definitive description in her celebrated treatise of Sufism, but relates the varying views of the discipline by renowned masters<sup>5</sup>. The core concept of the tradition, *ihsan*, that is living in the constant consciousness of God's presence is described in a famous and authentic prophetic tradition where a stranger<sup>6</sup> appearing as a traveler sits down close to the Prophet and asks him three questions:

[The stranger] said: "Tell me about *iman* (Faith)."

[The Prophet] said: "It is that you affirm God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day...."

[The stranger] said: "Muhammad, tell me about *Islam* (Submission to God)."

The Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: "Islam is that you bear witness, testifying that there is no object of worship aside from God, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God; and you establish the ritual prayer; and you give the alms-tax; and you fast in the month of Ramadan; and you perform the pilgrimage to the House if you are able to find a way to do so."

Finally, he said: "Tell me about *ihsan* (Virtue)<sup>7</sup>."

[The Prophet] said: It is ... that you worship God as though you see Him, for though you do not see Him, truly He sees You<sup>8</sup>.

Georgetown scholar of Islamic studies S. Hossein Nasr sees the strive to live the concept of

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1 Barks, C. 1995. *The Essential Rumi*, San Francisco: Harper.

2 El-Zein, A., 2000, Spiritual Consumption in the United States: the Rumi phenomenon, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 11:1, 1 March 2000 , pp. 71-85.

3 Baran, Z. (ed). 2004. Understanding Sufism and its Potential Role in US Policy, *Nixon Center Conference Report*, Washington, D.C., March 2004.

4 Nasr, S. H. 2002. *The Heart of Islam*, New York: HarperCollins.

5 Schimmel, A. M. 1975. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, U. of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, pp:3-22.

6 In the continuation of the tradition we learn that this was ArcAngel Gabriel who appeared in the form of a man to facilitate a learning experience for the companions.

7 Please note that the English word virtue is only an indicator of one of the meanings embedded in this loaded concept.

8 This famous prophetic tradition is related in multiple trusted books of Hadith, namely, Muslim, Iman, 1; Nesai, Iman, 6; Ebu Davud, Sunnet, 17; Tirmizi, Iman, 4. For a digital collection of important books of Islamic prophetic tradition, see *Hadith Encyclopedia*, Harf Information Technology, Cairo, 1996.

## *Ihsan* in one's life as a practical definition of Sufism:

As for *ihsan*, it is obvious that not everyone can worship God as if they saw Him. This is the station of the saintly, and *ihsan*, which means both "virtue" and "beauty", is associated with the spiritual path that leads to sanctity, and is considered practically a definition of Sufism<sup>9</sup>.

Elsewhere, he elaborates on the concept:

The goal of the inward life in Islam is to reach the Divine as both the Transcendent and the Imminent. It is to gain a vision of God as the Reality beyond all determination and at the same time of the world as "plunged in God". It is to see God everywhere<sup>10</sup>.

In a brief description of Sufism opening their collection of verses from renown Sufi masters, Fadiman and Frager point to the same concept:

Sufis are Muslim mystics who can trace their beginnings to the prophet Muhammad. Most Muslims would like to see and be with God after death, but the Sufis are impatient. They want to be with God now. Hence the Sufi path is the discipline and practice towards experiencing God in this very life<sup>11</sup>.

Consequently, a Sufi can be seen as a person 'who is completely absorbed in Divine Beloved and does not think of anything but Him.'<sup>12</sup>

Western analysts of the trends in the contemporary Islamic world often exhibit one of two fallacies: Overestimating the impact of contemporary Sufism or underestimating the impact of the deep current of the spiritual tradition of Islam. Hassan, writing for *Al-Ahram* weekly of Egypt, comments on the diverse paths of developments various Sufi traditions went through in countries or regions such as Egypt, Turkey, Algeria and the Indian Sub-continent:

American conceptions deal with Sufism either as a movement that forms a single and positive model to be spread, or as a unique, internal state that highly values conviction and human freedom and raises tolerance as a value in dealing with others. Yet Sufism no longer remains as it began, that being a state of asceticism and individual worship. It has developed into massive institutions that cross all continents, some of which strive to play roles in development, politics and society, and others that lose themselves in folklore and celebrations<sup>13</sup>.

Turkish, Indian, North African, Syrian, Indonesia-Malaysian and Persian Sufi traditions run deep and wide among contemporary Muslim populations<sup>14</sup>. Akbar Ahmed's recent anthropological excursion into eight predominantly Muslim countries, namely India, Indonesia, Jordan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Qatar, Syria and Turkey, highlight the spiritual tradition as the source of one of the three models of Muslim response to modernity and globalization<sup>15</sup>. After a detailed discussion of both historical and current developments involving Sufi orders, Martha B. Olcott of Carnegie Endowment for International Peace concludes that "Sufism has

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9 Nasr, S. H. 2002. *The Heart of Islam*, New York: HarperCollins, p.62.

10 Nasr, S. H. 1977. *Interior Life in Islam*, 3:2

11 Fadiman, J. and Frager, R. (editors) 1997. *Essential Sufism*. New York: Harper-Collins.

12 Schimmel, *ibid.* 16.

13 Hassan, A. A. 2007. "America's Favoured Islam", *Al-Ahram* weekly, published in Cairo, Egypt, available online at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/852/op1.htm>.

14 Chittick, W.C. 2000. *Sufism, A Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

15 Ahmed, Akbar. 2007. *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

a strong potential” in all countries of Central Asia<sup>16</sup>.

The influence of the spiritual tradition can be categorized into three: The first is the direct influence in the immediate fellowship of a Sufi order. A Sufi Order (or tariqah) is a fraternity of individuals who follow a particular school of Sufism under the guidance of a *sheikh* (spiritual master). A Sufi order can be seen as an institutionalized version of the individually oriented practices of the early Muslim ascetics. The orders are typically named in reference to their founders, such as the *Naqshbandi* order after Bahaudeen Naqshband or *Chisthi* order after Moinuddin Chisthi. The Sufi orders typically link their sheikh, through a lineage of various Sheikhs, to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and thus to Muhammad himself, upon whom be peace and blessings. One exception to this is the Naqshbandi order, which traces the chain of their spiritual masters to Abu Bakr, the first Caliph after Muhammad. Every student or seeker, named *mureed* (seeker), *faqeer* (poor), or *dervish*, is assigned a personal daily recitation (awrad), authorized by his guide. The spiritual practice and development of the seekers are supervised<sup>17</sup> by the guide. In most cases the sheikh nominates his *khalifah* or successor during his lifetime, who might be his son, a relative, or just a qualified member of the order.

The second impact of the spiritual tradition is an indirect, wider influence in the larger community of Muslims through lectures, “sohbets”<sup>18</sup> or companionship circles, and other types of oral tradition. Finally, the third type of influence in the contemporary world on Muslims as well as non-Muslims is through printed literature and other media. Among these three types of influences, the third type, influence through printed literature and media, has been gaining importance in contrast to the decline in direct Sufi order membership in many countries in the past two decades.

Armstrong comments that, Al-Ghazali’s masterpiece, *Ihya al-Ulum al-Din*, ‘which provides Muslims with a daily spiritual and practical regimen’, is the most quoted Muslim text after the Qur’an the Prophetic tradition (*ahadith*)<sup>19</sup>. Al-Ghazali wrote this book primarily to point out that a more fulfilling experience of faith is only possible through a worship life that leads a believer to deeper spiritual experiences. Ghazali is credited for this presentation of a formal description of Sufism in his works and his successful integration of Sufism with the Islamic Law.

Commenting on the cross-cutting influence of the spiritual tradition over Muslim life, Nasr comments<sup>20</sup>:

The practitioners of Sufism on all its different levels constitute an important group in Islamic society, even if not sociologically distinct as a class, and they have exercised great influence over the ages on fields as far as apart as the inner life and public ethics, psychology and art, metaphysics and the guilds, poetry and politics.

The Influence of Rumi’s works on the cultural lives of Turkish, Persian, Central Asian Muslims as well as Muslims living in the west can hardly be overstated. Lewis comments on

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16 Olcott, Martha Brill. 2007. Sufism in Central Asia: A Force for Moderation or a Cause of Politicization? *Carnegie PAPERS, Middle East Series, Russian and Eurasian Program*, Number 84, May 2007.

17 Schimmel, *ibid*, 237.

18 Sohbet, is a spiritual conversation between a guide and student(s) which relies on ancient oral storytelling traditions and practices.

19 Karen Armstrong, 2000, *Islam: A short History*, New York: Modern Library, 88.

20 Nasr, *ibid*. 177.

the inclusive and embracing spirit of the Rumi works<sup>21</sup>:

Any objective western reader who takes the time to compare the Divine Comedia with the Masnavi, which is about twice as long as the former, will have to acknowledge that Rumi, who wrote a half century before Dante, reflects a much more ecumenical spirit and a far broader and deeper religious sensibility.

Works of Rumi are published by Turkish Departments of Culture and Education, the whirling dervishes ceremonies held every year around December 17<sup>th</sup>, his passing away day, are sponsored by the Konya city government as well as the Turkish national government. According to Lewis, ‘in the nearby Islamic Republic of Iran, Rumi has reached new heights of popularity among the modern heirs of his language and culture.’<sup>22</sup>

## **The First Seekers on the Path of Spiritual Ascension**

The first centers of Sufi development in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries (first and second centuries of Islamic calendar) were the cities of Basra, Kufa and Baghdad in Iraq, Central Asia, in particular the city of Balkh in the Khorasan region, the birth place of Rumi, and Egypt. Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings, is regarded as the first spiritual master who passed his esoteric teachings orally to his successors, starting especially with Ali<sup>23</sup>, his cousin and son in law. Various Sufi orders trace the lineage of their Sufi masters to Ali and then Prophet Muhammad through an unbroken chain of transmission of special authority.

Sufism developed historically first as a concern over the preservation of the spiritual dimension of Islam, in parallel to the development of other Islamic sciences such as *Hadith* (prophetic tradition) and *Tafseer* (Qur’anic interpretation). During the early years of Islam, only a minority of religious commandments were written down. Practice and the oral tradition allowed Muslims to memorize religious principles concerning belief, worship life and social relationships. These principles, being vital issues in a Muslim’s personal and social life, were prioritized by scholars and later systematically collected in authentic books.

The praise-worthy efforts of these scholars facilitated the establishment of authentic resources for many Islamic sciences early on in the development of the Islamic civilization. Amidst these developments, some spiritually-oriented Muslims were concerned about the preservation of the spiritual tradition of their faith in a similar manner<sup>24</sup>:

While some scholars were engaged in these “outer” activities, Sufi masters were mostly concentrating on the Muhammadan Truth’s pure spiritual dimension. They sought to reveal the essence of humanity’s being, the real nature of existence, and the inner dynamics of humanity and the cosmos by calling attention to the reality of that which lies beneath and beyond their outer dimension. Adding to Qur’anic commentaries, narrations of Traditionists, and deductions of legal scholars, Sufi masters developed their ways through asceticism, spirituality, and self-purification in short, their practice and experience of religion.

Thus the Islamic spiritual life based on asceticism, regular worship, abstention from all major and minor sins, sincerity and purity of intention, love and yearning, and the individual’s admission of his or her essential impotence and destitution became the subject matter of Sufism, a new science possessing its own method, principles, rules, and terms.

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21 Franklin Lewis, 2000, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West*, Oxford: Oneworld, 3.

22 Lewis, *ibid*.

23 May God be pleased with him, a phrase of respect reserved for the companions of the Prophet.

24 Gülen, M. F. 2004. *Key concepts in the practice of Sufism*, New Jersey: The Light Inc., xviii.

This first century of Islam was also a century of material riches and worldly engagement. Especially during the Umayyad dynasty (661-749) the wealth and luxurious habits of the ruling class were criticized and contrasted with simple lifestyle of the early companions of the Prophet as well as the Prophet himself<sup>25</sup>. The first stage of the development is called the *zuhd* (asceticism) period. The first Sufis were considered ascetics<sup>26</sup> who reflected and meditated on the concepts of death, resurrection, the Day of Judgment and giving the account of one's life to God. Their lives were characterized by the principle of "Little food, little talk, and little sleep," following a prophetic saying in which Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) identified obesity, oversleeping and lack of deep faith as his greatest concerns over his community.

Early Sufis such as Hasan Al-Basri (d. 728), Ibrahim b. Adham (d.777), Shaiq of Balkh (d. 810), Al-Muhasibi (d. 837), Dhun-noon of Egypt (d. 859), Abu Yazid al-Bistami (d. 874) and Junaid of Baghdad (d. 910) are considered examples of the balanced spiritual tradition in which the seeker observes the religious law while pursuing the spiritual path. Mortification of the flesh, denial of carnal-self, willful poverty, abstinence, fasting, sessions of silent or loud remembrance, long nights of prayer, and Qur'anic recitations in early morning were commonly seen as the elements of the path of drawing near to God. The refinement and promotion of the notion of divine love in the Sufi tradition is attributed to a woman from Basrah in Iraq, Rabi'a al-Adawiya (d.801). Rabia yearned to love God only for God Himself, and not for any other concern such as hope of a reward (paradise) nor out of fear of judgement (hell). She also proclaimed that God's love preceded a believer's love of God.

The first tension of the spiritual tradition with the law-focused tradition is seen in the example of Hallaj Mansoor (d. 922) who exclaimed "I am the Truth" and was executed in Baghdad for blasphemy. He is also considered the father of the Wahdat-ul Wojud (Unity of Existence) movement within the Sufi tradition championed later by Ibn Al-Arabi. Later, the theme of divine love was brought to focus especially by a woman Sufi, Rabia Adawiyya, and found a rich expression in Sufi poetry, those of M. J. Rumi's being the most popular representatives.

Later, Sufism also assumed a reactionary role against the rigid interpretations of the orthodox religious scholars and legalists. To the spiritually oriented Muslims, theirs was an unjustified focus on one of the dimensions of the religion, the outer dimension, at the expense of the inner. Sometimes these dimensions are listed as three:

Religion consists of a dimension which is outward and another which, upon the basis of this outwardness, leads to the inward. These dimensions of the Islamic revelation are called the Shariah (the Sacred Law), the Tariqah (the Path) and the Haqiqah (the Truth), or from another point of view they correspond to Islam, Iman, and Ihsan, or "surrender", "faith" and "virtue"<sup>27</sup>.

To the first Sufis, outward observance of the Islamic laws regarding worship and social life were

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25 Michael Sells, 1996, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 20.

26 The issue of engagement with the world while pursuing the spiritual ascension ultimately led to different Sufi paths which favor one over the other. An example of an order that prefers seclusion is Khalwatiyya, while the more popular Naqshbandi order emphasizes engagement with the world. It is also argued that both paths have their proper audiences. An interesting anecdote on the reaction of Aisha, (may God be pleased with her), the second wife of Prophet Muhammad, to the early ascetics is as follows: Upon seeing a few men who were walking feebly and talking with a low voice, Aisha asked who they were. She was told that they were Zuhhad (ascetics). She is reported to exclaim, "By God, Umar (the second Caliph) was the real ascetic! When he walked he went somewhere, when he spoke he was heard and when he hit it hurt."

27 Nasr, S. H. 1966. *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, London.

not sufficient to lift a believer to the stage of *ihsan*<sup>28</sup>

Therefore it could be said that there has always been a need to maintain a balance between the outer and inner dimensions of the religion. Figures such as Hasan Al-Basri, and later Al-Ghazali were authorities successful at managing this tension and maintaining a balance appreciated by both the mainstream Muslims as well as the more spiritually focused. The following excerpt from an anonymous poem translated by Godlas illustrates some of the key concepts of the spiritual path as well as the effort by the seekers of spiritual ascension to demonstrate the complimentary role of their endeavor with respect to religious law:

What is Tasawwuf? Good character and awareness of God.

That's all Tasawwuf is. And nothing more.

What is Tasawwuf? Love and affection.

It is the cure for hatred and vengeance. And nothing more.

What is Tasawwuf? The heart attaining tranquility—  
which is the root of religion. And nothing more.

What is Tasawwuf? Concentrating your mind,  
which is the religion of Ahmad<sup>29</sup> (pbuh). And nothing more.

What is Tasawwuf? Contemplation that travels to the Divine throne.

It is a far-seeing gaze. And nothing more.

Tasawwuf is keeping one's distance from imagination and supposition.

Tasawwuf is found in certainty. And nothing more.

Surrendering one's soul to the care of the inviolability of religion;

this is Tasawwuf. And nothing more<sup>30</sup>.

The main argument of this paper is that the only approach that has a chance of influencing the majority of contemporary Muslims in the aforementioned positive ways without being subject to criticisms is the approach of “balanced” spiritual tradition, which is the early, “companion-style” or “first generation” spiritual tradition. Based on a balance of the outer dimension of Islamic law and worship life and the inner dimension of spiritual disciplines, and firmly rooted in the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition, this approach nevertheless shares many concepts and principles with the more sophisticated Sufi tradition. Exemplified by historic figures such as Al-Ghazali, and contemporary figures such as Gülen, the balanced spiritual tradition holds the highest potential for the education of Muslim youth with an inclusive and tolerant worldview.

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28 Sometimes also transliterated as *al-ikhsan*.

29 Another name of Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace and blessings of God.

30 Godlas, A. 2000. What is Tasawwuf (Sufism)? Translation from Persian by the author.

## Inclusive Concepts of the Muslim Spiritual Tradition

In this section we examine three inclusive and egalitarian concepts in the spiritual tradition of Islam which lend themselves well to the increasingly diverse world. These are the mirror concept, non-violence and service discipline.

### The Mirror Concept

The spiritual tradition of Islam embodies many concepts that are conducive to religious plurality. The heart of the tradition are the concepts of *hubb*<sup>31</sup>, love of the Divine and the concept of *ihsan*, or the state of constant awareness of God's presence<sup>32</sup>. One way of achieving this state is to discipline the body (actions) and the heart (thoughts, feelings) toward a state of spiritual purification<sup>33</sup>.

Tasawwuf [Sufism] is the path of gaining freedom from the vices and weaknesses particular to human nature and acquiring angelic qualities and conduct pleasing to God, and living in accordance with the requirements of knowledge and love of God and in the spiritual delight that comes thereby<sup>34</sup>.

The second, somewhat complementary way is to develop the capacity to see signs of God in everything. To a refined and spiritually awakened Muslim, therefore, everything becomes a mirror of God and everything reminds him or her of God. At a higher level, these signs become more than simple reminders as the traveler of the path of spiritual purification ceases to forget God at any moment. The signs then become displays of God's majesty, beauty, grace and other divine attributes at increasingly sophisticated ways. As the highest of the creations of God, humans are the walking displays of God's various attributes. In the words of Gülen, the author of one of the leading contemporary references on Sufi concepts<sup>35</sup>, the human resembles a droplet that is small in size yet capable of reflecting the Sun with all its attributes:

Humans, the greatest mirror of the names, attributes, and deeds of God, are a shining mirror, a marvelous fruit of life, a source for the whole universe, a sea that appears to be a tiny drop, a sun formed as a humble seed, a great melody in spite of their insignificant physical positions, and the source for existence all contained within a small body. Humans carry a holy secret that makes them equal to the entire universe with all their wealth of character; a wealth that can be developed to excellence<sup>36</sup>.

Every human is seen as a mirror of God in three aspects: In the first aspect, a human is seen as a masterpiece of art of the Master Artist, the Creator and Fashioner of everything. The face of the human is a display of beauty, order, function, compassion and wisdom. The eye or the brain of a human are equally impressive works of wonder. In every detail of a human's creation, a spiritually oriented Muslim sees opportunities for reflection.

The second way a human becomes a mirror of God is through their reliance on God. When a person becomes hungry and is fed, he/she becomes a mirror of God as the sustainer. When

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31 In Arabic or *ashk* in Persian.

32 Gülen, M. F. 2004. *Key concepts in the practice of Sufism*, New Jersey: The Light Inc.

33 Murata, S. and Chittick, W. C. 1994. *The Vision of Islam*. Minnesota: Paragon House.

34 Gülen, M. Fethullah. 2005. *The Statue of Our Souls: Revival in Islamic Thought and Activism*. New Jersey: The Light Inc., p. 5.

35 Gülen, M. F. 2004. *Key concepts in the practice of Sufism*, New Jersey: The Light Inc.

36 Gülen, M. Fethullah. 2005. *The Statue of Our Souls: Revival in Islamic Thought and Activism*. New Jersey: The Light Inc., p. 112.

a person becomes ill and is then healed, she becomes a mirror of God as the Healer. When a person seeks knowledge and is bestowed with knowledge, he becomes a mirror of God the Knower of All, the Owner of Infinite Knowledge.

The third way of mirrorship is through actions. For instance, God is compassionate toward His creation. A compassionate person, therefore becomes a mirror of God the Compassionate. God helps all his creation regardless of their belief in, or rejection of God. God's sustenance is indiscriminative. When a person helps every human in need, she becomes a mirror of God the Helper. God forgives the sins of humans who sincerely repent and turn toward Him. When a person forgives the mistakes and mistreatments of others, he becomes the mirror of God the Merciful. A target state in the spiritual tradition is to become a person such that when people see him or her they remember God. They can not help but say that "there must be a Compassionate God that such a person walks this earth."

It is noteworthy that only the third of these three ways of mirrorship is voluntary while the first two are involuntary. Therefore, every human, regardless of their creed is a mirror of God in those two aspects. This is a powerful paradigm and influence for peaceful coexistence in religious diversity. The words of the famous Anatolian Sufi poet Yunus Emre, who is also a source of inspiration for Gülen, resonates in the Turkish population even after eight centuries:

We love the creation due to the Creator<sup>37</sup>.

In another poem he points out the inherent inconsistency of those who claim to worship God but disregard the dignity of the most precious of God's creation, the human:

If you have broken a heart, then what you are doing is not prayer.

## Non-violence

The second influence of the spiritual tradition is the inclusive, emphatic and compassionate perspective that naturally lends itself to non-violence, going beyond tolerance to hospitality and friendship. A quote from Gülen illustrates the non-violence stance of a contemporary scholar who also represents the balanced spiritual tradition of Islam. The context of the quote was the era of ideologically driven armed conflicts in Turkey during the 1970s. Clashes among the youth groups claimed the lives of thousands of youth as well as members of security forces, intellectuals, teachers and politicians. Armed groups would attack each other, demand the students to boycott classes, and the shopkeepers to close down shops to disturb normal life in the country.

My audience know that when anarchy was everywhere in our country, I have called for calmness and controlling of anger. I had received death threats, yet I requested from my audience to continue working for peace, 'If I am assassinated, despite all your angers, I ask you to bury my body and seek for order, peace and love in our society. Regardless to what happens; we believers should be representatives of love and peace.<sup>38</sup>

Representing love and peace in times of adversity and violent conflict requires a level of *pious transcendence*, which could also be seen as holistic understanding of religious law. A

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37 Emre, Y., K. Helminski, R. Algan, E. Helminski (trans). 1999. *The Drop That Became the Sea: Lyric Poems of Yunus Emre*. Shambhala Publications.

38 Saritoprak, Z. 2005. An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence. *The Muslim World*, 95, no.3 (2005): 423.

prophetic tradition illustrates this concept:

A Muslim man was wounded in a battle. The next morning he needed to have a bath. The people around him were confused. Would they wash the whole body or leave the wound aside? Washing of the whole body being a requirement of ritual, they did so and the man died. Upon hearing the incident the Prophet declared “You killed the man. Could you not just wash the rest of his body and only slightly touch the wounded area?”

This pious transcendence enables a Muslim to choose and apply the appropriate religious law and organize their priorities more in conjunction with the spirit of Islamic faith, especially at times of hardship.

## Service Principle

Another principle of the spiritual tradition that is conducive to religious plurality and world peace is the *service* discipline. This can be summarized in the doctrine

Serving people is serving God.

Connected with the principles of humility, and chivalry, this principle encourages Sufis to serve public, regardless of their creed, in various ways, and especially in ways that are unexpected of one’s social rank. Harvesting crops, cleaning toilets or helping handicapped persons with grocery shopping are some examples. Gülen comments on the concept of *futuwwa*, a composite of such virtues as generosity, munificence, modesty, chastity, trustworthiness, loyalty, mercifulness, knowledge, humility, and piety<sup>39</sup>.

Some have summed up *futuwwa* in the four virtues mentioned by Haydar Karrar Ali, the fourth Caliph and cousin of the Prophet, upon whom be peace and blessings. They are: forgiving when one is able to punish, preserving mildness and acting mildly and gently when one is angry, wishing one’s enemies well and doing good to them, and being considerate of others’ well-being and happiness first, even when one is needy.

In Gülen’s philosophy this principle is put into the service of education with a new name: “The principle of devotion<sup>40</sup>.”

## Obstacles to Greater Impact of the Spiritual Tradition

While the inclusive and empathic influences of Sufism are desirable and conducive to inter-religious harmony, there are important impediments that prevent the spiritual tradition from having a greater impact. The first of these is the literalist opposition to more flexible interpretations of concepts from the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition and the strict definition of the notion of invention in religion, or “*Bid’a*”. The second consist of deviations of some Sufi orders and subsequent criticisms by orthodox Muslims. The third consist of political obstacles, namely, impact of politicization of Islam by some groups, politicization of certain Sufi groups and the charge of passivism directed against certain other Sufi orders.

Deviations of certain Sufi orders from the prophetic tradition include Saint and tomb worship, exaggerated veneration of spiritual masters (sheikh or pir), called *pirism* by Muhammad

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39 Gülen, *ibid.* 81-82.

40 Çetin, Muhammed. 2005. *Mobilization and Countermobilization: The Gülen Movement in Turkey. Proceedings from Islam in the Contemporary world: The Fethullah Gülen Movement in Thought and Practice*, Rice University, Houston, TX.

Iqbal<sup>41</sup>, statements that are considered *shirk* or associating partners with God, and negligence on obligatory prayers.

Especially important in this context is the notion of *bid'a*, or invention (innovation) in religion. Various forms of *dhikr*, or remembrance of God, such as repeating certain names of God in fixed numbers by controlling breathing etc., are considered by some as innovations.

Politicization of Islam during the late twentieth century has brought upon major influences on Sufism: On the one hand, the political Islamist groups have accused the Sufi orders as being complacent or passive. On the other hand certain governments, suspicious of any organization besides formal-government controlled ones, have suppressed Sufi orders made them illegal. Finally, some other governments have sought to orient Sufi orders as an ally political opposition.

From the eighteenth century onward, Sufi-led protest movements were often found in societies that were confronted with the encroachment of Western ideas or colonialism. Thus, rulers were either frightened by the political specter posed by Sufis or were eager to make common cause with them, depending on the circumstance. Alliances between Sufis and their rulers (both secular and religious) have also been of varying success, at least from the point of view of the governing class<sup>42</sup>.

In the perspectives of many prominent figures of Sufism, such as Al-Ghazali, Imam-I Rabbani Ahmed Sirhindi, a spiritually oriented Muslim can not be called a Sufi, unless he or she first observes the basics of Islamic creed and worship life. According to these authoritative figures, the claims of certain groups and sects that assume the name of a Sufi order should not be accepted at the face value. The Sufi path cannot be condemned because of the errors associated with the behaviors of such groups. In short, one should not throw the baby with the bath water.

## **Gülen's Criticisms of Contemporary Institutionalized Sufism**

While underlining the potential for spiritual development in the Sufi tradition, Gülen voices his own criticism of the deterioration among followers of the discipline, especially around the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. In 1925 Sufi orders were banned in Turkey. Referring to the deterioration of the Sufi centers prior to this era, Gülen commented that by then, the Sufi centers “have closed themselves already.” Gülen also alludes to the disengagement of the Sufi centers from the education and development of individuals and busying themselves in insignificant metaphysical discussions:

At a time when modern schools concentrated on ideological dogmas, institutions of religious education (*madrasas*) broke with life, institutions of spiritual training (*takyas*) were immersed in sheer metaphysics, and the army restricted itself to sheer force, this coordination [of knowledge] was essentially not possible<sup>43</sup>.

The third observation of Gülen concerning the Sufi institutions around the country was their failure to adapt themselves to the needs of the society and meet the challenges of the scientific/rational revolutions. Instead of revitalizing themselves, these organizations turned to “console themselves with virtues and wonders of the saints who had lived in previous centuries.”<sup>44</sup>

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41 Schimmel, *ibid.*, 22.

42 Olcott, *ibid.*

43 Gülen, F. 1996. *Towards the Lost Paradise*. London: Truostar. P.11 cited in Michel *ibid.*

44 Gülen, F. 1996. *Towards the Lost Paradise*. London: Truostar. P.11 cited in Michel *ibid.*

It is worth noting that Gülen's criticisms of Sufi orders and centers are historical and institutional in nature and do not pertain to Sufism as a discipline<sup>45</sup>. Each of the three deficiencies Gülen notes, "closing themselves before being closed", "disengagement from educational needs of the society and engagement in useless metaphysical speculation," and "failure to cope with the changing times" are matters of social decay and are not inherent deficiencies in the spiritual tradition.

Just as the beliefs and practices criticized as deviant have formed in an environment of a clash between the legalistic tradition, which represents the outer dimension, and the spiritual or inner dimension, the recovery of the spiritual tradition lies in the reunion of the inner and outer dimensions. In this paper, we call this union the 'balanced spiritual tradition'. In the next section we will discuss its main tenets.

## **From Hasan Al-Basri to Al-Ghazali to Gülen: The Balanced Spiritual Tradition**

A hallmark of the balanced spiritual tradition represented by figures such as Hasan Al-Basri, Al-Ghazali, and Gülen is the balancing of the inner and outer dimensions of faith, that is the Islamic law concerning worship and community life and the principles and practices of the spiritual path. In the eyes of these scholar/masters, faith is incomplete before a person realizes a deeper experience of the faith above and beyond simple following of the rules.

Sufism leads the way to *shawq*, delight, so that the practice of religious commitment is not some onerous and unpleasant burden that a person is forced to carry, but can rather be conducive to a joyful, loving acceptance of life<sup>46</sup>.

Representatives of the balanced spiritual tradition, such as Al-Ghazali and Gülen view Sufism as the inner dimension of the religious law, and consider it jugular that the two dimensions are never separated. Observance of the rules that pertain to externals without attention to their interior transformative power results in dry ritualism<sup>47</sup>. Trying to follow the spiritual path without regard to the religious law is often likened to "trying to build a house on a foundation of sand<sup>48</sup>". A prophetic tradition hints at this perspective:

There are those who pray for hours during night and all they gain is sleeplessness and tiredness.  
There are those who fast and all they gain are hunger and thirst.

The people described by this prophetic tradition are following the exterior rules perfectly. Yet, their effort is not benefiting them, hence they must be missing something. That something, according to the balanced spiritual tradition, is the observance of the inner dimension.

On the opposite pole, focusing exclusively on the interior dimension and rejecting (or taking lightly) the prescribed ritual prayers and rules of conduct opens the door to relativism and transgression. Only a balance of the exterior law and the inner discipline enables the seeker to proceed in the path of spiritual ascension to the stage of *ihsan*. Consequently, the traveler

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45 Kuru, A. T. 2003. Fethullah Gülen's Search for a Middle Way Between Modernity and Muslim Tradition. In *Turkish Islam and the secular state: The Gülen movement*. M. H. Yavuz and J. L. Esposito, eds. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

46 Michel, S.J., T. 2005. Sufism and modernity in the thought of Fethullah Gülen. *The Muslim World*, 95(3), 341-349.

47 Michel *ibid*.

48 Frager, R. Sufism and the Islamic Tradition. *Personality and Personal Growth*. Longman. p.563.

on the balanced spiritual path never separates the outer observance of the religious law from its inner dimension, and observes both.

Perhaps the most famous representative of the balanced spiritual tradition of Islam is Al-Ghazali. His book entitled “The Revival of Religious Sciences” is considered as a monumental work which “aligned Sufi experiences with Islamic beliefs and practices<sup>49</sup>”. He is well read around the world in Muslim communities despite their differences in many aspects.

The writings of Abu Hamid Muhammad Ibn Muhammad, known as al-Ghazali (A.D. 1058-1111), are among the most widely read Sufi teachings. Because of his influence, many Islamic theologians finally accepted Sufism within formal Islam. Called the Proof of Islam and the Restorer of Islam, he is one of the dominant figures in Islamic theology. His work altered the public view of Sufism from that of suspect, even heretical teaching, to a valued and essential part of Islam.<sup>50</sup>

Al-Ghazali regards the inner dimension as bringing life to religious sciences, while the religious law keeps the believer rooted in the mainstream Islamic tradition<sup>51</sup>. Speaking on the importance of experiential learning in the Sufi discipline, Al-Ghazali comments:

I acquired a thorough knowledge of their<sup>52</sup> research, and I learned all that was possible to learn their methods by study and oral teaching. It became clear to me ... that Sufism consists in experience rather than in definitions and that what I was lacking belonged to this domain, not of instruction, but of ... initiation<sup>53</sup>.

A trend among some of the representatives of the balanced spiritual tradition is the lack of a membership in a Sufi order and guidance by a personal Sufi master. At various times in his life, Gülen clearly stated that the movement inspired by his ideas is not a Sufi brotherhood and he himself can not be regarded as a Sufi master<sup>54</sup>.

The religious orders are institutions that appeared in the name of representing Sufism six centuries after our Prophet, upon whom be peace. They have their own rules and structures. Just as I never joined a Sufi order, I have never had any relationship with one<sup>55</sup>.

Combining this statement with the fact that Gülen wrote one of the most authoritative contemporary works on Sufism led some authors to conclude that Gülen belongs to a category of spiritually oriented Muslim scholars who continue the tradition of the first generation Sufism<sup>56</sup>. This observation naturally leads to the question: What elements of the spiritual tradition of Islam are present in the balanced path represented by figures such as Ghazali and Gülen, and whether these elements are subject to the same criticisms leveled at the Sufi brotherhoods.

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49 Frager, R. *ibid.* p.559.

50 Frager *ibid.*

51 Michel *ibid.*

52 Referring to the teachings of Sufi masters.

53 Frager, *ibid.* p.560.

54 Saritoprak, Zeki (2005a) ‘Introduction’, *The Muslim World, Special Issue, Islam in Contemporary Turkey: The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen*, Volume 95, No.3, July 2005, pp. 325-7 - (2005b) ‘An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence: A Turkish Experience’, *The Muslim World, Special Issue, Islam in Contemporary Turkey: The Contribution of Fethullah Gülen*, Volume 95, No.3, July 2005, pp. 413-27. - (2003).

55 Saritoprak, Z. 2003. *Fethullah Gülen: A Sufi in His Own Way*. In Yavuz, Hakan and Esposito, John (eds) (2003) *Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, pp. 156-169.

56 Gokcek, M. 2006. *Gülen and Sufism: A Historical Perspective*. In Robert Hunt et al. (eds), *Muslim Citizens of the Globalized World: Contributions of the Gülen Movement*. New Jersey: The Light Inc.

## How Balanced Spiritual Tradition Avoids Criticisms of Sufism

The first criticism of the Sufi tradition is the exaggerated veneration of spiritual masters, the preferring of sainthood to prophethood (“messengership”) and Sufi masters to Prophets and their companions. In various sermons and written works, Gülen clearly underlines the superiority of the Messengers. In particular, he uses a quote by Hasan Al-Basri (d. 110/728), a member of the first generation of Muslims after the generation of Prophet’s companions, known as the *tabeen*. This generation is revered and respected due to their having the opportunity to observe and learn from the companions of the Prophet. Al-Basri holds a special place among the *tabeen*. Al-Basri is credited with the refinement of the concepts of *‘irfan*, (personal and accurate knowledge of the divine, gnosis) and *kalam*, (Islamic theology). Born in 642 A.D. (22<sup>nd</sup> year of the Islamic calendar), Al-Basri spent most of his life in the first century of Islamic civilization. Al-Basri is also a perfect representative of the balanced spiritual tradition, being counted in the Sufi lineages (silsile) as the last element of the chain before Ali, as well as being respected as an orthodox Sunni scholar. His compiled book called *Ri’ayah li huquq Allah* (Observance of the Duties to Allah), a copy of which is reported to exist at Oxford, is regarded by some as the first book on Sufism. Mutahhari relates the following quote from Nicholson on Al-Basri’s significance, which also summarizes important stages of the Sufi tradition:

The first Muslim to give an experimental analysis of the inner life was Harith al-Muhasibi of Basrah ... ‘The Path’ (tariqah), as described by later writers, consists of acquired virtues (maqamat) and mystical states (ahwal). The first stage is repentance or conversion; then comes a series of others, e.g. renunciation, poverty, patience, trust in God, each being a preparation for the next<sup>57</sup>.

Secondly, the ‘urafa’ themselves trace their orders back to al- Hasan al-Basri; and from him to ‘Ali (A), such as the chain of the sheikhs of Abu Sa’id ibn Abi al-Khayr. Similarly, Ibn al-Nadim, in his famous al-Fihrist, traces the chain of Abu Muhammad Ja’far al-Khuldi back to al-Hasan Al-Basri, stating that al-Hasan al-basri had met seventy of the Companions who had fought at Badr.

Thirdly, some of the stories related of al-Hasan al-Basri give the impression that he was in fact part of a group that in later times became known as Sufis<sup>58</sup>.

Al-Basri compares the later generations of Muslims, including Sufi masters, to the companions as follows:

The greatest of the later generations of Muslims can not be a piece of dust under the feet of the horse of a companion of the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

On the question of *bid’a*, (innovation in religion) scholars of Islam fall into two camps. The majority, including Gülen, consider new concepts and practices as acceptable as long as they are based on principles outlined in the authentic prophetic traditions and they are not confused with the more authentic prophetic traditions. The other camp, represented by strict literalists argue that any innovation in religion is bad, regardless of its nature.

Michel points out to this phenomena that originate with the numerically small but politically influential circles inspired by the criticism of the famed scholar Ibn Taymiyya, who is seen as the originator of the literalist movement:

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57 Nicholson, R.A. 1931. *Mysticism in The Legacy of Islam*, London: ed. by Sir Thomas Arnold and Alfred Guillaume pp. 211-212.

58 Mutahhari, M. *An Introduction to the Islamic Sciences*, transl. By Ali Quli Qarai, *Al-Tawhid*, vol II No. 2.

(The Wahhabi perspective) view Sufism as responsible for turning the Islamic *ummah* away from its God-given task of building a society in accord with the ideals of the Qur'an and Sunnah; they accuse the Sufis of encouraging unwarranted and unorthodox innovations and of promulgating a passive, pietistic religiosity<sup>59</sup>.

The balanced tradition regards Sufism as one facet of the life of the sincere Muslim who seeks to witness and live fully the essence of the message contained in the Qur'an and the prophetic tradition<sup>60</sup>. However, the balanced tradition does not consider every concept or practice that historically has come out in the name of Sufism as a positive value, practices approaching Saint worship being primary examples.

For the representatives of the balanced spiritual tradition such as Gülen, Sufism and religious law are two aspects of the same truth and two complimentary dimensions. Human spiritual perfection is not possible with negligence in either dimension. The preference of an individual of elaboration in one dimension over the other should be attributed to either lack of knowledge or "it should be viewed as the result of a natural human tendency, which is that everyone gives priority to the way more compatible with his temperament and for which he has aptitude" (Michel 2003).

The tension between the two dimensions is in part due to the extremists such as those who claimed that following the exoteric regulations of the religious law were unnecessary for the seekers of the esoteric path, and those who declared even moderately liberal interpretations of Qur'anic verses or prophetic traditions as outside of the faith.

Another point of criticism, identified by Nursi<sup>61</sup>, is confusing inspiration with revelation. This criticism is leveled against the Sufi figures in history who claimed to have received personal inspiration which might apparently contradict the revelation as recorded in the Qur'an and authentic prophetic tradition. In this context the response of the balanced tradition is that the communication of God as the Lord of the Universe with His last messenger Muhammad through the Qur'an is the highest form of communication and is thus superior to all other forms of communication, including inspiration of the Sufi saints.

## The Question of the Spiritual Guide

The concept of a Sufi master occupies an important place in the later Sufi literature. The vast majority of the later Sufis discouraged the potential seekers from pursuing the spiritual path without a personal guide. The early Sufis such as Hasan Al-Basri, Rabia, Junayd, Muhasibi, Bishr, Ghazzali, Feriduddin Attar, and even Rumi did not belong to a *tariqah* or Sufi order. While they could each be regarded as a master on their own, a seeker without a personal guide would be seen as problematic from the perspective of institutionalized Sufism. Although we can see the same emphasis on the role of spiritual guide by important figures of the balanced spiritual tradition, another trend is the guidance of the virtual personality of a text:

A minority view has always held that the spiritual guide need not be a living person. Kharraqani, for example, was initiated into the Sufi path by the spirit of Abu Yazid al-Bistami, while 'Attar was inspired by the spirit of al-Hallaj. Other Sufis claimed to have as their guide Khidr, the mysterious companion of Moses mentioned in *Surat al-Kahf* of the Qur'an. Gülen's position is that he is

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59 Michel, *ibid.*

60 Michel, *ibid.*

61 Nursi, S. 1997. 29<sup>th</sup> Letter: 9<sup>th</sup> Section, Nine Allusions About the Ways of Sainthood and Sufism, *The Letters*. Istanbul: Kaynak A.S.

guided in his spiritual development by the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In Gülen's view, the Qur'an is not only the best guide, but is the source and font of all Sufi thought and practice. Rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, and supplemented by the views and experiences of later Sufis down through the centuries who applied the Qur'anic teachings through their own personal efforts (*ijtihad*), Sufism must be considered not an "alternative" path followed by some Muslims in contradistinction or in contradiction to the Islamic law but rather, one of the basic sciences of Islam.

## The Potential Impact of the Balanced Spiritual Tradition

Now we would like to give some indicators that point out that spiritual tradition that is free of deviations identified above has a great potential to influence the Muslim world. The famous Sunni scholar Dr. Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, chair of European Council for Fatwa and Research, whose religious opinion commands great respect among the politically oriented Muslims especially in the Middle East has the following to say about the balanced spiritual tradition:

By and large, we should try to take from Sufi ideas what corresponds to the teachings of Islam, such as the idea that calls to noble values of mutual love, as well as the idea that teaches one how to get rid of psychological ailments and to attain spiritual grace.

In fact, there are some examples of good Sufis, with some minor exceptions, from whom one can understand better this form of worship. Imam al-Ghazali is one of such moderate Sufi figure whose ideas go in line with the teachings of Islam<sup>62</sup>.

Another example of praise for the balanced spirituality comes from the strong critic of deviant Sufi orders Ibn Taymiyya about Bayazid Bistami, one of the early Sufis famous for his championing of the concept of *fana*, or the annihilation of the carnal self in awe and constant presence of God.

There are two categories of *fana'*: one is for the perfect Prophets and saints, and one is for seekers from among the saints and pious people (*saliheen*). Bayazid al-Bistami is from the first category of those who experience *fana'*, which means the complete renunciation of anything other than God. He accepts none except God. He worships none except Him, and he asks from none except Him." He continues, quoting Bayazid saying, "I want not to want except what He wants<sup>63</sup>."

In another place, Ibn-Taymiyya refers to Abd-al Qadir Gilani, the author of *Futuh-ul Ghayb* (The Conquest of the Unseen) and spiritual founding father of the Qadiri Sufi order, as "our teacher".

The upright among the followers of the Path - like the majority of the early sheikhs (*shuyukh al-salaf*) such as Fudayl ibn 'Iyad, Ibrahim ibn Adham, Ma' ruf al-Karkhi, al-Sari al-Saqai, al-Junayd ibn Muhammad and others of the early teachers, as well as Sheikh Abd al-Qadir [Gilani], Sheikh Hammad, Sheikh Abul Bayan and others of the later masters - do not permit the followers of the Path to depart from the divinely legislated command and prohibition, even were that person to have flown in the air or walked on water<sup>64</sup>.

Haddad comments that other works of Ibn Taymiyya are full of praise for what we call in this paper as the balanced spiritual tradition. He gives the example from Ibn Taymiyya's

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62 Al-Qardawi, Y. 2004. Islam's Stance on Sufism, SALAM Magazine, March-April, available online at <http://www.famsy.com/salam/Sufism0404.htm>

63 Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmoo` fatawi Sheikh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyya*. (The Collection of Opinions of Master Scholar of Islam Ibn Taymiyya), Riyadh. p. 516. Cited in Fouad Haddad, *Ibn Taymiyya on Futuoh Al-Ghayb and Sufism*, 1996. Available online at [http://www.abc.se/~m9783/n/itaysf\\_e.html](http://www.abc.se/~m9783/n/itaysf_e.html).

64 Ibn Taymiyya, *ibid*.

book entitled “*al-ihitjaaj bi al-qadar*” (Cairo: *al-matba`a al- salafiyya*, 1394/1974 p. 38) as a praise for the Sufi emphasis on love of God and their “voluntarist rather than intellectual approach” to attainment of spiritual improvement:

As for the Sufis, they affirm the love (of Allah), and this is more evident among them than all other issues. The basis of their Way (tariqa) is simply will and love. The affirmation of the love of Allah is well-known in the speech of their early and recent masters, just as it is affirmed in the Book and the Sunna and in the agreement of the salaf.

Hamza Yusuf, one of the rising leaders of the Muslim youth in North America and increasingly around the world, and the author/translator of the book entitled “Purification of the Heart<sup>65</sup>,” commented about the spiritual tradition with these words:

In fact what Islam is trying to do and what most of the other spiritual religions and in fact from the Muslim perspective all of them have failed to do is to join these two elements in a harmonious and balanced way and this is why in the tradition of Islam Sufism has always been part of the traditional Islamic curriculum in every single Muslim university. I know of no period in the Islamic tradition in which Sufism was not taught in the universities and not seen as an important and fundamental aspect of the tradition of Islam<sup>66</sup>.

These two examples illustrate the potential of the balanced spiritual tradition to avoid the criticisms of the strictest of the scholars opposing the deviations of certain Sufi organizations.

According to Ruthven, the intellectual leaders of modern Muslim India as well as Pakistan, such as Sayyid Ahmed Khan, Muhammad Iqbal and Abu’l Ala al-Maududi are indebted to Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi, also known as Imam Rabbani, a Naqshbandi Sufi reformer who sought to revive the more pure versions of the spiritual tradition of Islam free of Hindu influences<sup>67</sup>.

According to P. J. Stewart, the author of *Unfolding Islam*, ‘the future of Islam must lie in a renovated mystical orientation where debt of religious feeling can be yoked to metaphorical understandings of the Qur’an and the Prophetic traditions.’<sup>68</sup> According to Travers<sup>69</sup>, ‘there are signs that this is already happening’ such as the increasing popularity of Sufism in Central Asia, at the expense of political Islamism, and in the West ‘despite the media-grabbing clamour’ of the actions of politically oriented groups. The late Anne-Marie Schimmel comments about the renewed interest in the teachings of Naqshbandi tradition in Uzbekistan:

Studies, especially in the Naqshbandi Tariqa have proliferated during the last few years. It is interesting that last year in Bukhara that we have a conference at the mazar of Khaja Naqshband in which German and Uzbek scholars participated and scholars from other Central Asian countries. It was highly interesting to see that here the Uzbek interest in teaching the Naqshbandiyya became very visible because they claimed, and I think they were right, that the old adage ‘the hand at work, the heart close to the Divine Beloved’ is a very practical way of approaching modern science. It gives you the possibility of constantly thinking of God, remembering God, as it is also taught in the Quran and yet do your daily work successfully. The interest in the Naqshbandiyya has grown

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65 Yusuf, Hamza (trans.), 2004. *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart*. Translation and commentary of Imam al-Mawlud’s *Matharat al-Qulub*, Chicago: Starlatch.

66 Yusuf, Hamza. 1997. *Tasawwuf/Sufism in Islam*, lecture at Stanford University, available online at <http://sunnah.org/events/hamza/hamza.htm>.

67 Malise Ruthven, 1984, *Islam in the World*, London: Granta Publications, 2006.

68 In Ruthven, *ibid*, 429.

69 Writing the afterword for Ruthven, *ibid*, 429.

considerably<sup>70</sup>.

Travers argues that the Muslim Diaspora in the West, increasingly well educated in atmosphere of free association, freedom of expression and religious freedom, is a candidate to promote the spiritual tradition. Another advantage of this Diaspora is its experience in asserting itself 'culturally through the media and politically through the democratic system.' Beyond calls for social justice, the Islamic message of 'man's special responsibility as guardian of this planet' is likely to be relevant and significant for the protection of environment in the centuries to come.

It is a message which calls on men and women to show gratitude for the world's bounty, to use it wisely and distribute it equitably. It is a message phrased in the language and imagery of a pastoral people who understood that survival depended upon submission to the natural laws governing their environment, and upon rules of hospitality demanding an even sharing of limited resources. In a world increasingly driven by the gap between rich and poor nations, and growing danger of environmental catastrophe, this message has an urgent relevance. It is one we ignore at our peril.

Commenting on his impressions of the hajj pilgrimage he undertook in 2004, Fuad Nahdi, the editor-in-chief of Q News, a prominent British Muslim magazine especially among young Muslims, notes that the atmosphere of the hajj that year was more spiritual than in previous years. Nahdi states<sup>71</sup>:

Everywhere I find well-produced leaflets focusing on the spiritual aspects of the Hajj. The literature is more inclusive and more tolerant than one used to expect. In the past, this kind of spirituality would have been banned or cursed from the pulpits.

Geaves comments that reading between the lines of Nahdi's words, one can see the influence of more literalist and less tolerant forms of interpretation, as opposed to the more liberal approach of the spiritual tradition, in decline in the Muslim world.

We have alluded above to the increasing popularity of the works of Al-Ghazali and Rumi among Muslim populations of Turkey, Iran, Central Asia and the West. The influence of these towering figures, however, may remain dormant until invoked by contemporary authorities and opinion leaders such as Gülen. In his centerfold pieces for the top selling popular youth magazine of Turkey<sup>72</sup>, Gülen discussed key concepts of the spiritual tradition of Islam with references to the works of Al-Ghazali, and Rumi, as well as the other significant figures of the spiritual tradition, in addition to his references from the Qur'an and the Prophetic tradition. Gülen's impact is not limited to his sermons and written works. He is credited with starting a civil society movement focused on education and 'characterized by conscientious effort and tolerance for others.' One example of Gülen's countless comments on the reconciliatory and embracing attitude derived from the spiritual tradition is cited by Horkuc<sup>73</sup>:

It should be such a broad tolerance, that we can close our eyes to others' faults, show respect for different ideas, and forgive everything that is forgivable. In fact, even when our inalienable rights are violated, we should respect human values and try to establish justice. Even before the coarsest thoughts and crudest ideas, with the caution of a Prophet and without boiling over we should

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70 Schimmel, Anne-Marie, Sufism and its Influence on Europe, lecture at Stanford University, May 4, 1997, available online at <http://www.naqshbandi.org/events/sufitalk/sufismeu.htm>.

71 Ron Geaves, 2005, *Aspects of Islam*, Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 139.

72 The popular scientific and spiritual magazine SIZINTI is estimated to have a readership of over 700,000.

73 Hasan Horkuc, 2002, *New Muslim Discourses on Pluralism in the Postmodern Age*, American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, Spring 2002, 19 (2), footnote 62, cited in Michel, *ibid*.

respond with a mildness that the Qur'an presents as "gentle words."

Hundreds of educational institutions from kindergarten to college level have been established in Turkey and some 103 countries of the world by organizations within the aforementioned civil society movement inspired by Gülen. One characteristic of these institutions is that in addition to their excellence in physical and social sciences, math and language, they foster a culture of interfaith and intercultural respect and harmony.<sup>74</sup> Building bridges of peace among conflict-stricken groups, these institutions serve as trust-havens in fragile regions of the world. Examples of such as bridges can be seen in Philippines, where Muslim minority students study with their fellow Christian students in an atmosphere of trust<sup>75</sup>; Bosnia-Herzegovina where children of Bosnian Muslims who have been massacred by Serbians study shoulder-to-shoulder with their children<sup>76</sup>; Southeast Turkey where the Kurdish students get an opportunity to become doctors, scientists, lawyers and artists instead of being recruited by terrorist organizations<sup>77</sup>; and Macedonia where the fighting Albanian, Macedonian and Serbian factions carry their children to such schools for safety. In the example of Gülen, and the civil society movement initiated by his ideas, the latent potential of the spiritual tradition of Islam can be observed vividly.

## Conclusion

Sufism offers many significant concepts and practices that are indispensable in an age of globalization and religious plurality, such as the *mirror* concept and the universal human dignity, divine love emerging as a love of fellow humans, non-violence, and the service mentality.

The "mirror" concept views every human as a mirror of God in three aspects: Reflecting attributes and names of God as His work of art, reflection through reliance, and reflection through actions. Only the third of these ways is voluntary while the first two are involuntary. Therefore, every human, regardless of their creed is seen as a mirror of God in these two aspects. Consequently, every human is to be loved and admired for those aspects. This is a powerful paradigm and influence for peaceful coexistence in religious diversity in the post-modern world.

Various expressions of the spiritual tradition throughout history of Islam have centered around the concept of love. Since the beginning, divine love and its reflection in the form of love of fellow humans have been characteristic of spiritually oriented Muslims. While carrying the potential of pacifism with it, this concept has traditionally been put into practice in the form of non-violence or at least non aggression. Often, the seekers went beyond tolerance to hospitality and companionship.

Western analysts of the trends in the contemporary Islamic world often exhibit one of two fallacies: Overestimating the impact of contemporary Sufi orders or underestimating the impact of the deep current of the spiritual tradition of Islam. Turkish, Indian, North African, Syrian, Indonesia-Malaysian and Persian Sufi traditions run deep and wide among contemporary

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74 Zeki Saritoprak, 'An Islamic Approach to Peace and Nonviolence: A Turkish Experience', *The Muslim World*, Vol. 95 (July 2005), pp. 413-427

75 Michel, Thomas. 2003. Fethullah Gülen as an Educator. In *Turkish Islam and the secular state: The Gülen movement*. M. H. Yavuz and J. L. Esposito, eds. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

76 Serif Ali Tekalan, 'Monuments of Love and Alturism', in Baris Kopruleri (Bridges of Peace), Istanbul: Ufuk Kitaplari, 2005, 254.

77 Mehmet Kalyoncu, 'The Counter Terrorism Issue In Terms Of Systems Theory; Diyarbakir as a Case Study', presentation at the Second Istanbul Conference on Democracy and Global Security, June 14-16, 2007.

Muslim populations. The influence of the spiritual tradition can be categorized into three: Direct influence in the immediate fellowship of a Sufi order, indirect, wider influence in the larger community of Muslims through lectures, “sohbets” or other types of oral tradition, and finally, influence in the contemporary world on Muslims as well as non-Muslims through printed literature and other media. We gave indicators of how especially this third type of influence is attracting larger audiences, especially among younger generations of Muslims.

Despite the presence of the aforementioned positive notions, the impact of Sufism on larger Muslim populations has been limited by three factors: The first is the literalist opposition to more flexible interpretations of concepts from the Qur’an and the Prophetic tradition and the strict definition of the notion of invention in religion, or “*Bid’a*.” The second is the deviations of some Sufi orders and subsequent criticisms by orthodox Muslims. The third impediment consists of the political obstacles, namely, impact of politicization of religion by some groups and political moves by certain Sufi orders.

While sharing the aforementioned inclusive and synergistic concepts with the more sophisticated, institutionalized Sufi tradition, the ‘balanced’ spiritual tradition avoids these criticisms by holding the prophetic tradition higher over any other practice even if based on the framework of the former. This approach, represented by towering historical figures such as Hasan Al-Basri and Al-Ghazali as well as contemporary figures such as Gülen, “emphasizes the central role of the Qur’an and Sunna, it has a tolerant and non-rigid style, and it emphasizes religious activism<sup>78</sup>.” By the same token, the balanced spiritual tradition steers clear of negligence in obligatory forms of worship, practices resembling *shirk*, or associating partners with God, such as Saint worship.

We gave examples of fierce critics of the Sufi orders of their time, such as Ibn Taymiyya, as well as contemporary influential Muslim figures, who nevertheless applaud the balanced practice of the early masters of the spiritual tradition. The criticism of passivity is answered by historians of Islam who point out to numerous examples of Sufi orders participating in defensive struggles.

While immediate membership in a Sufi order has declined considerably around the world, the impact of spiritual masters have continued to influence and shape the minds and hearts of Muslim populations. Name recognition and reverence for spiritual personalities as well as affinity for their teachings are clearly observable in many Muslim communities from Turkey to Egypt to India to Indonesia. According to Ahmed, the spiritual tradition is the source and defining tone of one of the three major responses to modernity and globalization that can be observed in the Muslim communities around the world. The works of Al-Ghazali and Rumi remain most read and quoted Muslim literature after the Qur’an and Prophetic tradition.

Analysts point out to the increase in the popularity of the spiritual tradition of Islam at the expense of political Islamism which is declining after decades of semi-successes and profound failures. The failures of the politicized Islam in the past century and the recent tragedies of terror and the subsequent association of Islam with unjustified violence have prepared the Muslim mind for a worldview that could shape a harmonious Muslim response to globalization. The balanced spiritual tradition of Islam holds the greatest potential to be that worldview and help the world steer toward peaceful and harmonious coexistence with religious plurality.

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78 Gokcek, *ibid*.