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Islam as Identity, Islam as Culture

At this juncture, every country in the Middle East is witnessing serious, often strident, debates about how to reconcile Islam as culture, a set of guiding values and a source of personal identity, with existing or desired political structures and institutions. This is not a new phenomenon but continues an unresolved dilemma that began immediately after the death of Muhammad in A.D. 632 and that is, in a sense, being played out today in brutal confrontations in Algeria and Afghanistan. We also see it as shaping the ongoing struggle for power in the Islamic Republic of Iran, pitting an entrenched conservative clerical group against those seeking broader, participatory rule. In Turkey, another variant of this conflict can be seen in a struggle among a determinedly secular military establishment, Islamist political parties, and various parties of the left and right. One contested issue, whether explicit or not, is the balance between individual autonomy and group or communal responsibilities and social control. This chapter will focus primarily on the unfolding of Islam as both a nexus of values, norms, and expectations and as a source of identity.

The Prophet's vision of a community of believers united in their common faith in one God was embodied during his lifetime in the Islamic state. The unity of this polity was, however, more apparent than real, masking as it did great social and economic tensions and fundamental disagreements. In short, the early Islamic community, like any religious or ideological movement, had to accommodate existing social and political realities. The early Muslim movement had, in fact, brought together quite disparate societies from northern and southern Arabia, people pursuing different ways of life and speaking different dialects, but all seeking expression and even contending for power within the nascent Islamic state. Immediately upon Muhammad's death, the community was confronted by a number of political challenges, including the secession of some tribes who attempted to follow other, so-called "false prophets." The first caliphs, however, succeeded in keeping the community together and in forging

a vigorously expanding empire. The borders of this empire soon reached the Pyrenees in the west and Afghanistan in the east. The conquest of this vast area, much greater than that conquered by Alexander, was rapidly accompanied by the conversion of its diverse peoples to Islam, a fact that must attest to the power of the new Islamic order.

Only the heartland of Byzantium in Asia Minor and its capital Constantinople withstood the forces of the early Arab armies. The great Sassanian Empire of Persia disintegrated rapidly as its armies were defeated and its capital, Ctesiphon, destroyed by 651. Perhaps it is because of the Islamic movement's great and rapid success that correspondingly powerful forces soon came to threaten it. Within a quarter of a century after Muhammad's death, dissenting political movements, using the idiom of Islam, had broken away from the main body of Muslims. Throughout subsequent Middle Eastern history, Islam as a revolutionary force has counterbalanced Islam as an established political and social order.

Islamic movements from the earliest periods have had their origin in political protests whose claims to legitimacy were always expressed in a religious idiom. This is consistent with a view that permits no theoretical distinction between religion and politics. Thus any political challenge to the state invariably assumes religious overtones, and any doctrinal disagreement can easily imply a potential political threat.

SCHISMS IN ISLAM: THE SHI'A

The single most important schismatic movement in Islam is the Shi'a, whose adherents predominate today in Iran, southern Iraq, and in parts of Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. Until recently, in Syria and Lebanon the rural Shi'a communities constituted a poor and depressed population, dominated in feudal fashion by large landlords, including Sunni and Christian as well as Shi'a families.

As we described earlier, the Shi'a split arose from a dispute over who should succeed the Prophet after his death. A minority of Muslims championed 'Ali, the Prophet's first cousin and his son-in-law; this group, which became known as the Shi'a (that is, "partisans of 'Ali"), in effect, restricted legitimate succession to the direct line of descent from Muhammad through 'Ali and his wife Fatima, Muhammad's daughter. This position conflicted with that of the majority who believed that a successor *khalifa*, caliph, must be elected. The majority position prevailed, and Abu Bakr, an old, trusted companion of Muhammad was chosen as the first caliph and leader of the community. 'Ali did, in time, become the fourth caliph, but he was immediately opposed by an already entrenched Muslim leadership and, most importantly, by the new governor of Syria, who was a member of the powerful Ummayyad clan. The ensuing civil war in which 'Ali was ultimately defeated and killed rent the Muslim community. In many respects the successful opposition to 'Ali on the part of the

Umayyads reflected the fact that the center of political power had, by now, shifted out of Arabia to Syria and Iraq. From then on, Mecca ceased to be a center of political power, a role assumed by Damascus and later Baghdad.¹

The civil war and 'Ali's defeat had many important consequences for the Middle East. Quite apart from the emergence of Shi'ism as a separate political movement, it also affected the geographic and ethnic distribution of the population. For example, a large number of the supporters of 'Ali were Yemeni tribesmen who came to settle in the region of Kufa in southern Iraq. The Yemenis considered themselves culturally superior to the northern Arabian tribes and felt that they had been politically shunted aside by the ruling Umayyad aristocracy. They were among the first to rally to 'Ali's party, thus marking the beginning of a significant Shi'a presence in Iraq.

Another sectarian movement founded at this time was that of the Kharijites, or "seceders," who withdrew from 'Ali's camp during his war with the Umayyads. The Kharijite movement acquired considerable significance as the vehicle for local rebellions in Syria and Iraq, but its political importance declined after the eighth century. Descendants of the Kharijites are found today in Oman, Zanzibar, and parts of East and North Africa, where they are known as 'Ibadis. They represent a moderate branch of the original movement that espoused the simplicity and democracy of the original Muslim community at Medina. In Oman, the 'Ibadis constitute the ruling oligarchy, as they did in Zanzibar until the mid-1950s. Nevertheless, the Kharijites did establish a divisive precedent that has come to characterize much of Islamic dissidence. By defining those Muslims who do not espouse their beliefs as "apostates," they challenged the very definition of what constitutes an Islamic community.

Losing their challenge to the Umayyads and persecuted throughout the Islamic world, the Shi'a were soon forced to go underground. Secret but active, they began to rally dissidents with a proselytizing zeal that made them grow in number and influence. Increasingly, segments of the non-Arab populations of Iraq, Syria, and Persia joined their ranks. Some historians feel that the Shi'a movement represented a populist ethnic reaction to the exclusiveness and discrimination practiced by the conquering Arab tribes, who tended to form a privileged caste of warriors ruling over the indigenous people. Even though the latter had converted in large numbers and were, at least in principle, the equal of the Arabs, the social and political distinctions between the Arab conquerors and the converted population remained important. Quite apart from being a vehicle for political dissent, Shi'ism also allowed the perpetuation of local beliefs and practices that were contrary to Sunni formulations. Shi'ism flourished as a folk or popular cult, much as do the mystic orders and cults today, which are still often viewed as anti-establishment.

Although a Shi'a dynasty was to achieve power in Egypt during the tenth and twelfth centuries, the most significant and lasting political success of the

¹For an excellent introduction to Shi'ism, see Richard Yann (1995).

Shi'a came in 1502, when Shah Ismail seized the throne of Persia and made Shi'ism the state religion. The formal attainment of power in Persia after a long period of struggle further shaped the dogma and organization of Shi'a Islam in ways quite distinct from that of Sunni Islam.

SHI'A BELIEFS: A CULTURE OF MARTYRDOM AND DISSENT

The Shi'a hold that the family of Muhammad, and specifically 'Ali and his male descendants from his marriage to Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet, possess supernatural powers and are uniquely qualified for the caliphate and the leadership of the Islamic community. Thus, the first three caliphs and all succeeding ones are viewed as usurpers, having displaced the only legitimate successor to Muhammad, namely, 'Ali, who is considered to be the first imam. Whereas to the Sunni, the term *imam* simply designates the leader of the Friday mosque prayers, to the Shi'a it has a very special meaning. In fact, for the Shi'a, belief in the imam constitutes the sixth tenet or pillar of religion, in addition to the five described in the previous chapter.

The doctrine of the imamate holds that the imam is the agent of Divine Illumination and the medium of Divine Revelation. Shi'a imams are considered to be sinless and infallible, and thus are empowered with authority to pronounce dogma. This authority, plus a body of "esoteric knowledge" that is believed to have been originally bestowed on 'Ali, have since been passed down to a select number of his male descendants. Nonetheless, the various Shi'a sects differ over the order of succession to the imamate, some championing one over another of the various descendants of 'Ali.

This doctrine, regarding 'Ali and his descendants as special beings, is in sharp contrast with the insistence of mainstream Sunni on the humanity of Muhammad, the Messenger, and his role as the last of the Prophets. It further makes of all descendants of 'Ali a caste-like group who even today enjoy a special status among the Shi'a, where they are collectively known as *sayyid*.

The sayyid (pl. *sadda*) tend to marry among themselves and are usually subject to special consideration in that violence should not be directed against their person or property; to do so, even inadvertently, is considered a sacrilege. Some sayyid are thought of as holy, and pious believers may give the sayyid money as a tithe. Even in Sunni communities, descendants of the Prophet's family are accorded special recognition. It should be emphasized here that the status of sayyid does not in itself confer wealth, power, or even significant social influence on the individual. In some communities, the sayyid may even form a loosely defined group of landless and socially marginal mendicants sustained by charity. Elsewhere, for example in southern Arabia until recently, the sayyid as a group constituted a wealthy, ruling oligarchy who jealously preserved their control over property and power at the same time that they perpetuated their genealogical claim to holy status.

Another distinguishing theme in Shi'ism is that of martyrdom centered on the figure of the third imam, Hussein, one of two sons of 'Ali, who succeeded to the imamate after the short-lived reign of his older brother. In 680, Imam Hussein, along with members of his family, was ambushed and massacred by Ummayyad troops near the city of Karbala in southern Iraq. This tragedy, which closely followed the assassination of 'Ali by a Kharijite fanatic, gave Shi'a Islam a specifically tragic cast and a definite proclivity toward a cult of martyrdom. The devotion of the Shi'a to the tragic figure of Hussein and his descendants, many of whom also met with violent death, adds a dimension to Shi'ism not found in Sunni Islam.

The betrayal and martyrdom of Imam Hussein is dramatically enacted yearly on the tenth day, *'ashura*, of the month of Muharram, with rites that portray the tragedy with much emotion and grief. These rites, known as the *ta'ziyya*, the mourning ritual, vary greatly among Shi'a communities and even within Iran. Probably no other public display so impresses the nonobserver as does the intensity of feeling expressed in the processions and passion plays, which culminate with the *'ashura* performance. The murders of Hussein and family members are then enacted, often with local sayyid playing leading roles in dramatizations in which the severed head of the murdered Hussein addresses the community. Public parades and demonstrations of grief are joined by spectators who sometimes engage in violent self-flagellation. The predominant message concerns the injustice of this world, oppression by its illegitimate rulers, and the ultimate triumph of truth and justice. The plays dramatically portray the perfidy and tyranny of rulers, especially Arab and Turkish caliphs. Christians and Jews are sometimes represented as collaborators with the oppressors. Unpopular current leaders and governments may be reviled by being associated in the plays with the foes of Hussein. Thus, Hussein's betrayal and murder are transmuted into a sacrifice made on behalf of the community which ever since has become emblematic of martyrdom with its concomitant promises of a reward in Paradise.

The tomb of Hussein in Karbala and that of 'Ali in Najaf, like those of subsequent imams located in Baghdad, Qum, Meshhed, and elsewhere, are venerated as shrines and regularly visited by pilgrims. The sanctuaries of Karbala and Najaf are considered holy ground, and the pious make efforts to bring the bodies of their dead for burial in their environs. Pilgrims bring donations of gold, fine jewelry, carpets, and other valuables to the major shrines, which historically have been endowed with great wealth. Shahs, sultans, emperors, and other rulers have all made gifts in demonstration of piety and perhaps in pursuit of legitimacy. Even the not overly pious former empress of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, saw fit to donate two massive gold and jewel-encrusted doors to the sanctuary of Karbala.

The cupolas of prominent shrines are leafed in gold, and colored mosaics, mirrors, and gold and silver calligraphy embellish the inside walls. The effect on the pilgrim can be overwhelming. As the nineteenth-century German traveler-scholar Nöldeke wrote about the sanctuary of Hussein in Karbala:

the general impression made by the interior must be called fairy-like, when in the dusk—even in the daytime it is dim inside—the light of innumerable lamps and candles around the silver shrine, reflected a thousand and again a thousand times from the innumerable small crystal facets produces a charming effect beyond the dreams of imagination. In the roof of the dome, the light loses its strength; only here and there a few crystal surfaces gleam like the stars in the sky.²

The majority of the Shi'a today belong to the Imami, or Twelver sect. They believe in an unbroken chain of 12 imams, beginning with 'Ali and ending with Muhammad al-Mahdi, who, while still a child, disappeared in the mosque of Samarra in Iraq in 874. He was rumored to have been secretly murdered by the 'Abbasids, the dynasty then in power. Al-Mahdi is believed to be hidden or invisible, in a state of occultation, or noncorporeal existence, and one day he is expected to return as the *Mahdi*, the Rightly Guided One, to usher in a reign of justice and peace in a world full of sin and injustice. The Shi'a thus share a messianic concept with the Jews and the Christians, a concept that may have antecedents in the early Zoroastrian religion of Persia.

The cult of martyrdom and the messianic belief in the return of the Hidden Imam are at the core of the Shi'a ethos. Moreover Shi'a Islam has developed a form of mysticism lacking almost altogether in Sunni Islam in that esoteric knowledge (*nass*) is believed to have been passed from Muhammad to 'Ali, and hence down the chain of subsequent imams. Further, Shi'a are allowed to use dissimulation or denial (known as the doctrine of *taqiyya*) to preserve secret religious knowledge in the face of persecution. The idea of arcane or esoteric sacred knowledge, passed from expert to acolyte, is an important basis for religious rank (Lindholm, 1996).

The concept of the *Mahdi* has its echo in a widespread folk belief among Sunni people as well that a *Mahdi*-like leader will emerge to restore "True Islam" and obliterate injustice and oppression. This is a variant on what anthropologists call *millenarianism*, a belief in the restoration of an ideal but lost social order. Millenarian movements are often triggered by severe cultural dislocations, such as those occasioned by foreign invasion or colonialism. One such Islamic case was the *Mahdi* revolt in the Sudan in the late nineteenth century, which protested Anglo-Egyptian rule. Although put down after bloody fighting, the *Mahdiyya* movement marked the beginning of Sudanese nationalism.

THE SHI'A RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

In comparison with their Sunni counterparts, Shi'a clergy are more hierarchically and centrally organized; historically, they have also been much more prone to take oppositional roles in their relationship to government. Their claim

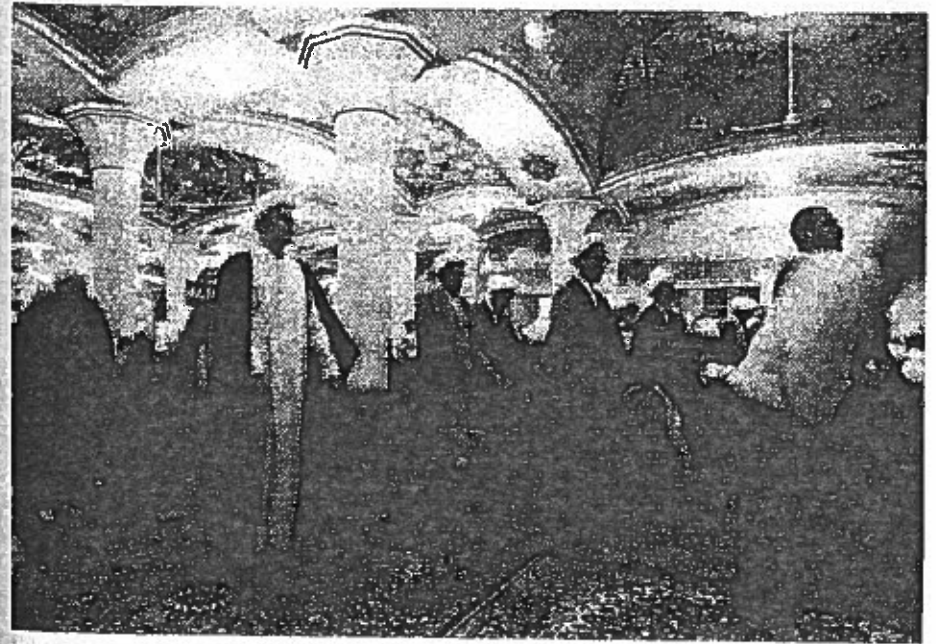
²A. Nöldeke, as quoted in H. A. R. Gibb and H. H. Kramers (1955, pp. 360–361).

to authority derives from their role as the deputies of the absent imam. In an influential article on the role of Iranian 'ulama as opposition leaders, Hamid Algar prophetically foresaw their importance in rallying the populace against the unpopular regime of the Shah of Iran and even predicted the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini (1972, pp. 211–231). As Algar pointed out, the very ideology of the imamate, with its emphasis on the return of the imam, renders all government, even those formally affiliated with Shi'ism, usurpatory. For generations, the Shi'a 'ulama have reacted against the tyranny of autocratic rulers, using the martyrdom of Hussein as the exemplification of sacrifice in the attainment of temporal justice.

Higher levels of clergy, which in Shi'ism are distinguished by clear ranks, have propagated their role as arbiters of the imam's authority and interpreters of his will. Those holding the title of *mujtahid*, that is, those capable of interpreting the law, generally serve as community leaders. As spiritual teachers, especially those of high-rank called *ayatollahs*, they offer themselves as moral and spiritual guides. The rank of *ayatollah* (literally, the "sign of God") is achieved through piety, knowledge, and scholarship. From time to time, the *ayatollahs* induct new members to their ranks, which at any given time tend to number around thirty. In turn, they collectively recognize one from among them to be designated as *al-Uzma*, or Supreme. Some of Ayatollah Khomeini's more enthusiastic supporters took to referring to him as imam, a promotion to which in reality none can aspire. In theory, individual Shi'a select a particular *mujtahid* to emulate and to recognize as his or her personal authority on moral and religious issues. This obviously entails the submission of the layperson to the



A member of Hezbollah in south Lebanon. His wounds were self-inflicted during *ta'ziyya* ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein.



Shi'a clerical students praying in a mosque in Qum, Iran.

opinions of the spiritual guide. Because *mujtahids* can be called upon to advise and make judgments on all aspects of life, their pronouncements are of obvious significance.

In Shi'a communities, both *mujtahids* and lower-ranking clerical functionaries called *mullahs* are in close touch with the masses as they are called upon to offer very personalized guidance, a role not usually played by Sunni 'ulama. Still, even among the Sunni, spiritual guides—*sheikhs*—fill a similar role, albeit one not endorsed by orthodox doctrine. Individual men and women, the sick, the healthy, the rich and the poor alike regularly seek out their spiritual mentors with gifts, attend their prayer sessions, read their religious texts, and call upon them for solace when faced with misfortune. People gather in the presence of important *mujtahids* bearing petitions for help in dealing with government authorities—to get sons out of jail, to secure jobs, to rectify bureaucratic abuse—thereby reinforcing the clerics' prestige and influence.

In Iran, donations by the pious over generations have created vast holdings of property set aside for the support of clerics, shrines, mosques, and religious schools. Moreover the fact that followers give directly to their chosen mentors has traditionally given the 'ulama an independent economic base. Both the Shah of Iran and his father before him attempted to seize those holdings and break the power of the 'ulama—and both failed.

The Iranian 'ulama perpetuate themselves much like their Sunni counterparts through their *madradas* (school-seminary), to which students are drawn

from all over the country. Students without means are supported by the endowments of the school-seminary. When deemed ready, they return to their communities; a select few may stay to pursue further study and themselves become *mujtahids*. Both the cities of Najaf in Iraq and Qum in Iran are considered to be major centers of Shi'a studies, attracting advanced scholars to their schools and libraries.³

SECTS WITHIN SHI'ISM

Shi'ism itself is fragmented in a way not encountered in the Sunni tradition. A number of sects disagree so profoundly on central issues of dogma that they scarcely recognize the legitimacy of each other's views. The dominant schismatic divisions have to do with the nature of the imamate and the order of succession. Divisions within Shi'ism are further complicated by the principle of *taqiyya*, "dissimulation of belief," which they all share. This pragmatic approach, which allows a believer to dissimulate or conceal his or her real belief when threatened or in a hostile environment, has also served to shield a proliferation of divergent rites and beliefs, even among sects that share the same name. It also raises difficult questions about the definition of "orthodoxy" in a religion that lacks a church.

Four Shi'a or Shi'a-derived groups deserve mention here because they illustrate some of the different directions taken by Shi'ism, as well as being of ethnographic importance in their own right. These four are the Isma'ili (or Sevener, as they are sometimes called), the 'Alawi in Syria and the Alevi in Turkey, the Druze, and the Zaidi.

The Isma'ili sect, perhaps the least important group in the Middle East today, originated in 765, when they broke off from mainstream Shi'a over the choice of a successor to the sixth imam. For them, the legitimate seventh imam should have been Isma'il (d. 760), whom they believe to be the last in the line of imams and the one who will reappear as the *Mahdi*. The Isma'ilis led a number of local revolts and even managed to establish short-lived states in Syria and Bahrain during the tenth century. But the apogee of their political success was the accession of the Isma'ili Fatimid dynasty to power in Egypt during the tenth and eleventh centuries. Later, in Persia, a strong and well-organized community of Isma'ilis was established around the mountain fortress of Alamut, near Qazvin. From their mountain stronghold, emissaries were sent out to perpetrate acts of political sabotage and assassination attempts against the rulers. As the sect was reputed to use hashish in their ritual, the Isma'ilis of Alamut came to be known as *al-Hashashin* (hashish smokers), whence the English word "assassin."

³ For an excellent account of the *madrasas* of Qum and the culture of religious education in Iran, see Michael Fischer (1980).

After the Isma'ili stronghold in Persia was destroyed in 1250 by the Mongols, they ceased to be politically important in the Middle East. Today, Isma'ilis are found in India, Pakistan, Syria, the Persian Gulf area, and parts of Central Asia and East Africa. A group among them, the Nizaris, pays special homage to the Agha Khan, whose family claims descent from the seventh imam whom they consider to be the "living imam." What distinguishes the Isma'ili even today is their insistence on an allegorical and esoteric interpretation of the Quran. This practice separates the religious initiate from the layperson in a way not found among the majority of Muslims. The paradox in the case of the Isma'ili is clear. What began as a populist, near-revolutionary movement against the Sunni oligarchy and its ruling institutions has, in time, engendered an ideology that sustains a favored few in positions of leadership and mediation with God.

The Druze are an offshoot of the Isma'ili movement. The sect's origins date to the eleventh century, when a Persian Isma'ili theologian named Hamza began to preach a doctrine that later evolved into a new religion. Hamza's successor, al-Darazi (who gave his name to the movement), succeeded in establishing the new religion among the mountain-dwelling populations of southern Lebanon and Syria. The Druze, a secretive and tightly knit group, have distinct religious beliefs that, to a large extent, are also derived from an esoteric interpretation of the Quran. Their religion is held in secret and fully known only to a small number of people called the *uqqal*, those who are enlightened. The rest form a second category referred to as the *juhhal*, the ignorant, those who have not been fully instructed in the mysteries of their religion but who, nonetheless, are instructed to follow its strict moral and ethical code. Both men and women can choose to study and join the ranks of the *uqqal*. Each Druze community is regulated by a council, *majlis*, headed by an elderly sheikh; the *majlis* meets once a week on Thursday evenings for prayer and to review communal matters.

At the social apex of Druze communities as a whole is a handful of sheikhs who have achieved their rank through piety and scholarship and who act as moral guides for the community. The sheikhs, distinguished by their special crown-shaped wool turbans, lead a monastic life devoted to religious studies and to serving the spiritual needs of the larger Druze community, which today is found scattered in Syria, Lebanon, and Israel. Israeli Druze, unlike the Muslim and Christian Arab-Israeli communities, enjoy a privileged status with the Israeli government; Druze men, in fact, serve in the Israeli defense forces.⁴

The 'Alawis and Nusairis of Syria and Lebanon, the Alevis of Turkey, and the Shabak of Iraq are closely related Shi'a-derived sects.⁵ The 'Alawi, who, like the others, are a predominantly rural population, practice a religion carefully concealed from outsiders; like the Druze, their doctrines and rituals are derived

⁴ For a general study of the Druze, see Robert Brenton Betts (1988). For an ethnographic study of the Druze in Israel, see Aharon Layish (1982).

⁵ The best source on the Alevi is Tord Olsson et al. (1998).

from an esoteric interpretation of the Quran. The 'Alawi, long a denigrated and marginal rural minority in Syria, today number among their members a majority of the political leaders who owe their initial power to their role in the Syrian army, to which they were recruited by the French.

In Turkey, the Alevi situation is rather different. In the past they were closely associated with the Bektaşî order of dervishes, itself closely associated with the Janissaries. Thus, while resembling the Alawi in many ways, their intellectual roots and recent history are quite distinct. Long regarded with suspicion and hostility by the Sunni 'ulama, they only recently have begun to mobilize politically. Frequently they are found in one or the other of the leftist parties and have been involved in armed communal conflict in at least two major towns in the east, Sivas and Maraş. The new visibility of the Alevis on the regional and national political scenes has occasioned a powerful backlash on the part of the Sunni 'ulama establishment, which had long both denigrated them and minimized their demographic presence. As recently as 1993, 37 members of a group celebrating the writings of *pir* Abtal, an Alevi saint and mystic poet, were killed in the southeastern city of Sivas by a mob that burned down the hotel in which they were meeting.

Alevis, speaking variously Turkish, Kurdish, or Arabic, depending on their region of origin, are widely distributed throughout Anatolia. While largely rural-dwelling in the past, there is at least one major Istanbul neighborhood of Alevi concentration and this is also the case in smaller cities. Alevis have to some extent been embraced by left-leaning intellectuals, as their rites and beliefs stress a communal and egalitarian ethos with less emphasis on sexual segregation. Further, they were represented by secular intellectuals as exemplifying a downtrodden population that chose religion as a vehicle of resistance. Some Alevi reject the primacy of the Quran and Shari'a; but one should be wary of any simplistic characterizations. In their own words, "We follow many paths." Alevi communal rituals involve men and women with an emphasis on group solidarity and the minimizing of intra-group dispute. Formerly socially invisible, today their spokesmen are increasingly prominent on the national scene.

A few local groups, however, are identified with orders considered too esoteric or heterodox to be included with either Sunni Islam or moderate Shi'ism. The Kurdish-speaking Shabak of northern Iraq are an extreme example of a religiously defined closed or encysted community, although there are parallels elsewhere (Rassam, 1974).

The Shabak were, until the 1960s, landless sharecroppers who worked on fields owned by urban Sunni landlords. Their religious leaders, called *pirs*, served as spiritual guides and leaders of the local community, while their ethnically distinct and powerful landlords served as general patrons and representatives in dealing with the national government. In common with other Muslim secret sects, the Shabak developed their own interpretations and ceremonials with distinctive features, including private and public confessions, tolerance of alcoholic beverages, and a general laxity in observance of Muslim ritual obliga-

tions. The primary mechanism of social integration within the community is the relationship between adult males and their spiritual guides, the *pirs*. The *pirs* are grouped into several ranked levels all under the leadership of the supreme head of the order, the *Baba*. The Shabak religious calendar is crowded with private and public ceremonies presided over by *pirs*, which bring together relatives and neighbors to participate in public sacrifice and the sharing of communal meals.

Their secretive beliefs, regarded as heretical by outsiders, their insistence on marrying within the community, and their rural isolation define the boundaries separating them from the larger society. Their secretive socioreligious system, which helped them maintain their identity over time, also kept them a weak and exploited minority and reinforced their dependency on their landlords. However, conditions for the Shabak began to change in the late 1960s as a direct result of land reform measures and literacy campaigns undertaken by the Ba'ath government of Iraq. Many Shabak now own their land, which was expropriated from their former landlords; some have moved to cities nearby, and still others work in newly established factories.

The Zaidi, who are found primarily in Yemen today, are perhaps the least heterodox of the Shi'a sects. While they restrict the imamate to descendants of Zaid, a grandson of Hussein, it is the community that chooses the imam among a number of qualified contenders. Zaidi imams are chosen on the basis of their religious knowledge, their political skills, and their ability to command. The Zaidi presence in Yemen goes back to the late ninth century, when Imam al-Hadi Yahya was invited by Yemeni tribes to come from Mecca to Yemen to resolve long-standing disputes among the warring tribal factions. From their beginning at the end of the ninth century until they were deposed in the 1960s, Zaidi imams ruled Yemen, providing a locus of political legitimacy and an avenue for reconciliation in a tribally segmented country. Even today, the Zaidi, a numerical minority, continue to dominate the political and economic scene in Yemen. The case of the Zaidi exemplifies how a small oligarchy using the claim of holy descent and religious leadership as a source for political authority and legitimacy succeeded in ruling an ethnically and tribally fragmented population.⁶

ISLAMIC MYSTICISM: THE SUFI WAY

The texture of Islamic religious experience is further enriched by mysticism. Middle Eastern people from all regions, rural and urban alike, have from the beginning of Islam been heirs to a long tradition of mysticism and asceticism in which personal piety and emotional catharsis combine. Sufism (Arabic: *tasawwuf*), as Islamic mysticism is commonly called, embraces a vast array of beliefs, rituals, and even formal institutions, such as orders and brotherhoods.

⁶For an informative discussion of the political role of Muslim sectarianism, including the Druze, the 'Alawi, and the Zaidi, see Fouad I. Khouri (1990).

In many respects, Sufism represents an aspect of Islam that adapts to the changing moods and exigencies of the moment. Through its openness and individualized character, Sufism has buffered Sunni and Shi'a orthodoxies from many of the challenges and pressures that might have engendered major reformation. In fact, many of the recurring revitalization and reform movements within Islam have sprung from Sufism and have expressed themselves through religious orders and brotherhoods that parallel, and sometimes even challenge, but do not replace, the structure of the formal religion. The significance of Sufism for facilitating the spread of Islam in India, central and Southeast Asia, and Africa cannot be underestimated. It is everywhere a vehicle for popular local beliefs and practices, and as such tends to be expressed differently in different areas, and its political role remains powerful as a potential mobilizer of mass sentiment. Sufism, therefore, has both its private dimension, rooted in intimate individual religious experience, as well as its public dimension in organizing politically significant movements.

The origin of the term *Sufi* is obscure. The general assumption is that it comes from the garments of rough, undyed wool (or *suf*) worn by the early mystics in Baghdad. As early as the eighth century, these men wandered from town to town preaching asceticism, spiritual discipline, and ecstatic communion with God. The Sufis emphasized emotional spontaneity and sought to free the religious experience from the legalistic demands of the Shari'a. By allowing each individual to seek his or her own spiritual path, *tariqa*, Sufism came to represent a popular reaction to the increasingly rigid and legalistic religious establishment.

In Sufism, the ultimate goal is loss of individual identity and complete union with "Truth" or "Ultimate Reality." This state, mystics believe, may be achieved through intuition and not through the exercise of reason. Mystics seek to achieve their goals by renouncing worldly concerns and through various spiritual and physical exercises. The Sufi path to God consists of a number of stages through which initiates have to pass. On the way, they are assisted by personal teachers—sheikhs, or *pirs*. Once the initiates successfully pass through all the stages, they will attain their ultimate goal, a new kind of consciousness consisting of *ma'rifa* (knowledge) and *haqiqa* (truth). This mystical progress is described in a Turkish saying:

To know Shari'a is to know that yours is yours, and mine is mine.
And to know the *tariqa* is to know that yours is yours, and mine is yours, too.
But to know the *ma'rifa* is to know that there is neither mine nor yours.

From its inception and throughout its history, poetry has been an important medium for the expression of Sufi sentiment, and many of the leading mystics were also celebrated poets. Al-Hallaj, the ninth-century Sufi martyr, was born in Persia but spent most of his adult life teaching and writing in Baghdad. A great poet and a persuasive teacher, al-Hallaj attracted a large number of followers and grew so influential that he posed a threat to the established authority

of the *'ulama*, who eventually conspired with the ruling dynasty to have him executed in 922. The charge against him was heresy. In what is perhaps the most celebrated statement of early Sufism, al-Hallaj had declared, "I am the Absolute Truth."

In his poetry, al-Hallaj celebrated mystical love and the harmony that follows the complete union with God:

I am he who I love, and he whom I love is I,
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.

Even before al-Hallaj, the theme of unbound, unconditional love for God had become an integral part of Sufi belief. Rabi'a al-'Adawiya (d. 801), a freed female slave who lived in Iraq, taught that love should replace fear as the motive for religious devotion. The story is told that once Rabi'a was seen walking in the streets with a torch in one hand and a pitcher of water in the other. When questioned, she answered: "I want to throw fire into Paradise, and pour water into Hell, so that these two veils may disappear and it becomes clear who worships God out of love, not out of fear of Hell or hope for Paradise" (Schimmel, 1975, p. 98).

One of the most popular folk characters in the Middle East, Mulla Nasrudin, is also a vehicle of Sufi teaching. The stories of Mulla Nasrudin, told as jokes or moral fables, form a distinct literary genre specifically used by Sufis to express the subtlety of mystical knowledge, as the seemingly simple tales can be interpreted at many levels. The following two examples, chosen from a vast repertoire, serve to illustrate a style of Sufi teaching and at the same time introduce one of the most famous figures of popular culture in the Middle East. They are taken from the work of Idris Shah (1964), a Pakistani Sufi who is largely responsible for the current popularity of Sufism in the West.

Mulla Nasrudin was walking along an alleyway one day when a man fell from a roof and landed on top of him. The other man was unhurt, but Nasrudin had to be taken to the hospital.

"What teaching do you infer from this event, Master?" one of his disciples asked him. "Avoid belief in inevitability, even if cause and effect seem inevitable! Shun theoretical questions like: 'If a man falls off a roof will his neck be broken?' He fell, but my neck is broken." (p. 59)

As Shah explains, this tale is used by Sufi masters to teach the initiate to question belief in simple cause and effect and to avoid taking things for granted.

Another tale illustrates the tendency of people to think in habitual patterns that may prevent them from grasping new points of view:

Nasrudin used to take his donkey across a frontier every day, with the panniers loaded with straw. Since he admitted to being a smuggler when he trudged home every night, the frontier guards searched him again and again. They searched his person, sifted the straw,

steeped it in water, even burned it from time to time. Meanwhile, he was becoming visibly more and more prosperous.

Then he retired and went to live in another country. Here one of the customs officers met him years later.

"You can tell me now, Nasrudin," he said, "Whatever was it that you were smuggling, when we could never catch you at?"

"Donkeys," said Nasrudin. (p. 59)

SUFI ORDERS AND BROTHERHOODS

Sufism, which had its origins in isolated, individual religious experiences, by the thirteenth century had developed into a mass movement. It acquired an institutional structure within which full-time teachers instructed the lay or uninitiated. The different teachings of important mystics formed the basis for orders or brotherhoods that still exist today and that are usually known by the name of their founder. Each order revolves around a specific *tariqa* laid down by a famous mystic, who is often regarded as a saint because he is considered an intermediary between human beings and God. Allegiance to one or another of these orders may cut across different classes and ethnic backgrounds. Women may also participate, although they usually have their own separate groups. Some orders may be closely associated with segments of the ruling establishment, as, for example, in the case of the military during the early Ottoman period, who, as we mentioned earlier, were associated with the Bektaşî order of dervishes. Others may be limited in their membership to marginal groups in the society.

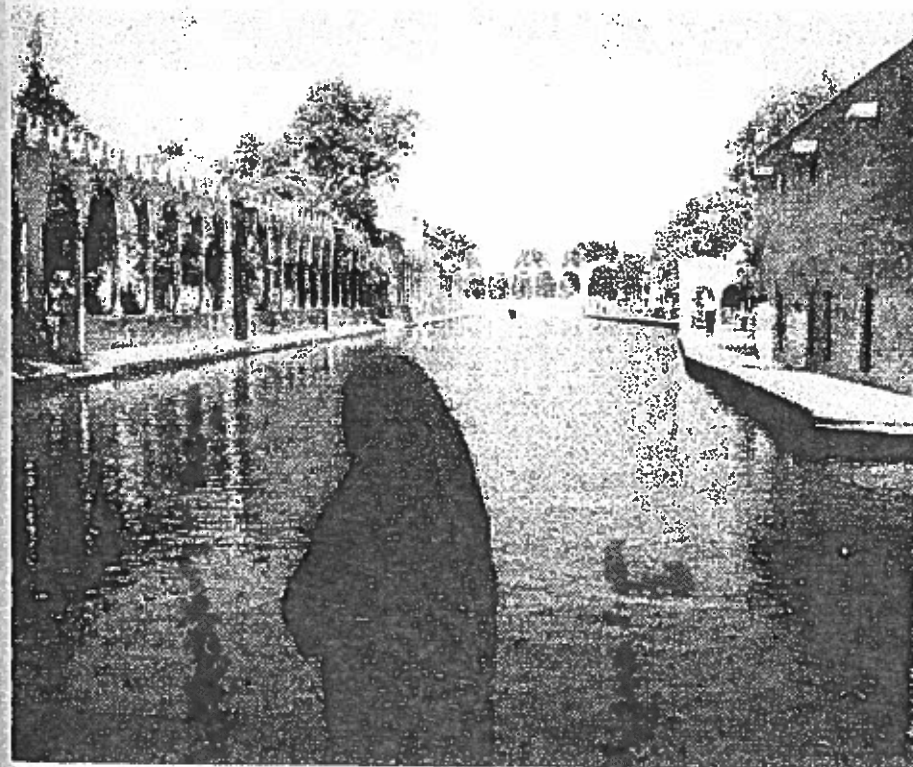
The sheikhs, or masters, meet regularly with their followers in lodges, *zawiya* (*tekke*, in Turkish), to study and to perform the spiritual exercises. Those who devote themselves full time to the order may themselves become teachers and establish their own *zawiya* within a loose association of the order. In this way, Sufi orders and brotherhoods come to link nomadic camp to village and village to city. Dispersed as they are, the orders constitute a vital network joining different regions and populations, even cutting across national boundaries. For example, the Qadiriyya order of Baghdad has lodges from India to Senegal, including some in countries such as Turkey where they function surreptitiously. In the past and in some parts of the Middle East today, *zawiyas* serve as hostels for pilgrims and travelers, as schools for children, and as community centers. *Zawiyas* that house the tombs of local saints are considered sanctuaries, sacred areas where oaths may be taken and where fugitives seek refuge.

POPULAR BELIEFS: "SAINTS," SHEIKHS, AND BARAKA

The success of Sufi orders was, to a large extent, no doubt due to their capacity to incorporate local beliefs and practices into an overall synthesis of popular Islam. Moreover, the close relationship between the *zawiyas* and the local community

and the fact that the teachers in the *zawiyas* were most often of local origin and spoke the native dialect were of considerable help in integrating Islam into local community life. Two pre-Islamic beliefs that found their way into Sufism and that are retained in popular Islam are the cult of saints and the concept of *baraka*.

Valerie Hoffman, who has observed religious expression in Egypt over a long period, writes that belief in saints or people with supernatural powers is ubiquitous. The term *sheikh*, which literally means "elder," is also used to refer to men who possess religious authority and are regarded as teachers and masters. A sheikh of profound spirituality and charisma is called "*wali*," meaning "friend of God," a term usually glossed as "saint" in English. Such individuals are believed to possess charisma, or *baraka*, divine blessing. In northwest Africa, they are commonly referred to as *marabout*. "The qualities typically deemed mandatory for saints include piety, observance of the Shari'a, knowledge of God, and the performance of miracles. . . . Sufi writings on sainthood assure us that saints exist in all countries and will continue to exist as long as the world exists; indeed they are essential for the well-being of the world" (Hoffman, 1999, p. 19; see also Hoffman, 1995).



The pool of Abraham at Urfa, southeastern Turkey. The site is sacred to Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

There is no formal mechanism or bureaucracy in Islam that identifies or "canonizes" saints; which sheikhs become sanctified is usually a matter of local recognition. Some may become widely hailed for piety and miracle-making abilities, but identification is complicated because the qualities of sainthood, *wilaya*, are sometimes believed to be hidden and only selectively and often posthumously revealed. For example, Hoffman (1999) reports that in Cairo there is a shrine erected on the site of a tomb of a small boy who, only after his death, revealed himself as a saint through a dream to a man who never knew him. The man subsequently built the shrine, which today is visited by many seeking the *baraka* or blessing of the boy saint.

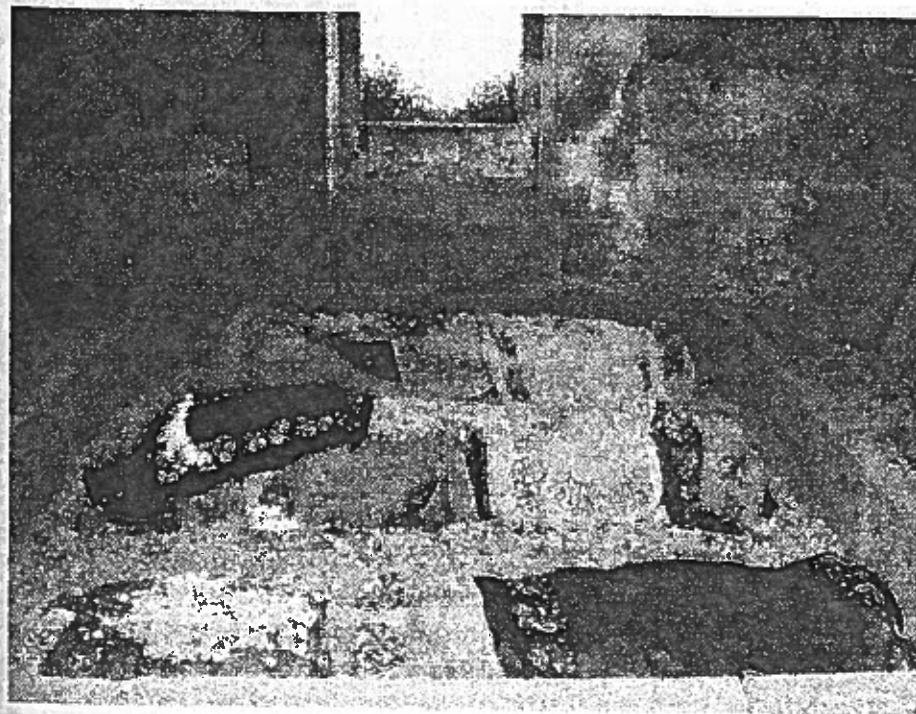
As in other endeavors, sons frequently may follow in their father's footsteps and become sheikhs. Both men and women may be recognized as having inherited their father's spiritual essence (*asrar*), but while women, in principle, can become saints, Egypt's Supreme Council of Sufi Orders does not recognize their leadership in life. Neighborhood and regional shrines of both male and female saints are important features of the landscape, places to be visited for comfort in illness and for divine assistance. While reformist or conservative purists may downplay their importance or denounce them for heterodoxy, belief in saints and sheikhs remains a major element of everyday piety.⁷

Baraka, which may be translated as "blessing or grace," is actually a very complex concept that may also mean holiness or the quality of divine blessing. Its Christian counterpart is the concept of divine grace, and, to a certain extent, the widespread secular concept of good luck. As we noted earlier, a person who possesses a great deal of *baraka* may be regarded as a saint, *wali*, or *marabout*. Both men and women may possess *baraka*, and this charismatic, presumably wonder-working power may be either inherited or acquired.

All descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or of those of his immediate family are believed to have inherited some of his *baraka*, some more so than others. But *baraka* may also be acquired by individuals especially favored by God. These individuals become living saints, who in their lives exemplify extreme piety and divine grace; they demonstrate their *baraka* through their abilities to bring good fortune, heal the sick, and make miracles. Most founders and many leaders of Sufi orders are considered saints. Saints' cults may also develop around individuals whose only distinction is to die in battle or under unusual circumstances, with their *baraka* becoming apparent postmortem. Unlike Christian saints, Muslim saints are often recognized in their lifetime, and their designation does not derive, as we have said, from a formal declaration or canonization by any religious institution. Rather it derives from communal recognition, reflecting an informal consensus among followers and members of the community.

Tombs of saints are found throughout the Middle East, both in the cities and the countryside. Usually constructed of dressed stone, these tombs frequently

⁷ For two classic studies of Sufi orders, one historical, the other anthropological, see John Kingsley Birge (1937) and E. E. Evans Pritchard (1949).



The tomb of a seventeenth-century holy man and his family in Siirt, Turkey. The tomb is regularly visited by supplicants.

rise from fields alongside major roads to signal a halting place for passersby. Smaller whitewashed and green-domed structures may be the focus of regular visits by nearby villagers, while larger, sometimes monumental, edifices attract visitors from a wider area. On a fine day, groups of women and their children often pass the time in friendly socializing at local shrines. Indeed, it is not unusual for entire families to make seasonal outings to a favorite shrine, taking along food, which they may share with other visitors or with the beggars who are often found in the vicinity of major shrines.

These tomb-shrines are invariably differentiated from the mosques that may adjoin the particularly important shrines. Visitors seek out the tomb of the saint, circumambulate it, pray and meditate, and press bits of wax, cloth, or small pebbles on the walls of the chamber to signify special pleas to the saint. Many tombs are found near sacred springs or groves, sometimes enclosed by low walls made all the more dramatic for the lack of similar greenery in the often deforested landscape. The tombs of founders of major Sufi orders are usually located at the center of great shrine complexes.

Specialized powers may be attributed to different saints, including the ability to cure infertility in women, to treat children's diseases, to ensure success

in love, or to heal the insane. More women than men seek out the *baraka* of the shrines. Perhaps because they are generally barred from participating in the formal mosque prayers, women tend to find special meaning in their relationship to saints.

In Iran, women turn to the local shrines of *imamzadehs*, male and female saints who are descendants of the 12 Imams. *Imamzadehs* are revered for their closeness to God, and their shrines are regularly visited by men and women seeking spiritual guidance and help with personal problems. A particularly popular shrine in the city of Shiraz is Qadamagh, associated with 'Abbas, the half-brother of the third imam, Hussein. Anne Bettridge (1993) describes a Saturday evening when the shrine building and the courtyard fill up with women. "Off to the side, a group of women may be praying while others are seated on the floor playing with children and exchanging news. A few women may prefer to sit alone and weep. . . . [O]utside in the courtyard people are seated on the ground eating, drinking tea, and sharing a sweet, *halva*, which they have made in fulfillment of vows" (p. 241).

The relationship between a woman and an *imamzadeh* can be a very personal one, and it is not unusual for a woman to have a lifetime relationship with a particular saint whom she believes to be especially sympathetic and responsive to her needs. Women implore, harangue, and threaten their favorite *imamzadehs* as they seek their help. As Bettridge notes, more than providing an approved setting for women to get away from home and socialize together, local shrines allow women to express their feelings and attempt to control their lives:

The fact that women in Muslim Iran are associated with local pilgrimages is neither accidental nor incidental. Men are associated with the mosque, religious texts, reasoned theological discussions, formal ritual assemblies—in short, with intellectual aspects of religion. Women's association with local pilgrimage points out that it is bound with things of the heart, the troubling aspects of life which questions, unsettles and answers obliquely. . . . *Ziarat* [the visit] gives scope to the personal and difficult aspects of life and allows both men and women and especially women to express their emotional sides—to grieve and wail in an approved setting and to celebrate joyously with others. (p. 247)

The *baraka* associated with saints has its negative counterpart in the popular/folk concept of "ill-purpose," the evil eye or '*ayn*. This force is believed to bring sickness and misfortune and may be thought of as a form of witchcraft. Just as some people inherently possess *baraka*, others have in them the power of the '*ayn*. These people, it is believed, can cause bad luck simply by their glance. A person may deliberately direct the evil eye against enemies or their property, but he or she may also do so unwittingly through unconscious envy. To guard against the evil eye, various amulets and charms may be worn, especially by children, who are thought to be most vulnerable. Valuable animals, such as prized cattle, camels, horses, and rams, are usually protected with blue beads. A common charm worn by women is a hand made of gold, silver, or some metal filigree.

Verses from the Quran written on paper and worn about the body in locketts are believed to be especially potent, as are blue beads, amber, cowrie shells, and iron. Religious phrases such as *bismallah* (in the name of God) and *mashallah* (as God wills) adorn buses and walls and are continually on people's lips. Any undertaking, whether it is the beginning of a meal, a journey, or any other task, may invoke *bismallah*, whereas *mashallah* prefaces any praise directed at children or other family members, particularly by strangers. In this case, God's name is invoked to neutralize the likelihood of unconscious envy and the casting of the evil eye on the individual praised.

But when the evil eye is seen to afflict someone, say, a child, there is a solution—exorcism, part of many religious traditions. One form of exorcism practiced throughout the region, known in Turkish as *Kurşun Dokma* (Pouring Lead), involves three—of breath, of prayer, of spoons—and molten lead and water. The molten lead is plunged into a pan of cold water held first over the head, then the chest, and lastly the legs of the "patient." On each occasion the exorcist (often a woman) carefully examines the shape of the reconstituted lead. Small protuberances indicate that the evil eye has certainly been cast, and bits of ash settled into the lead mean the curse has truly reached the patient's heart. The exorcist then says three prayers, pausing between each to blow gently at the patient. After the prayers, the patient is offered three spoons of the water from



Bedouin woman folk healer and her clients. Her table displays religious amulets, charms, herbs, and potions.

the pan, and as each is drunk, the exorcist throws the spoon over her shoulder. It is an especially good sign if the spoons land touching each other.

SUFISM AND SOCIOPOLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Sufi orders and Sufi-inspired mass movements take many forms and perform different functions. Some are devoted to curing the ill; others emphasize the individual mystical experience and have little public role; still others mobilize the masses into political action and, as such, seem far removed from their Sufi roots. The objectives and functions of the hundreds of orders are so diverse that some scholars question the value of lumping all of them under a single label.⁸ We cannot detail here the range of variation among Sufi-inspired movements, but we have selected three cases to illustrate the vast scope of this phenomenon.

Our first case is that of the Wahabis of Saudi Arabia. After a turbulent history of violent opposition to instituted authority, Wahabism, a puritanical reformist movement, has today become the official state-sponsored doctrine of Saudi Arabia. Our second example, that of the Hamidiya-Shadhiliya order of Egypt, stands in sharp contrast. Eschewing any militant function or political stand, the Shadhiliya is a small, primarily urban-based, tightly organized order whose primary function is that of a fraternal religious club and, on occasion, a place of refuge and material support for members. The third case, that of the Nur or Fethullah Gülen Community Movement, represents Sufism in a new guise, as a contemporary social movement using all the tools of a secular age to spread their influence.

The Wahabis of Saudi Arabia

Wahabism had its origin in a special *tariqa* proclaimed by its founder, Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahab (1703–1787). A student and exponent of Sufism, 'abd al-Wahab left Arabia to study and teach in Iraq and Iran. After extensive travels, he returned to his homeland and began to teach his own *tariqa* based on a highly puritanical interpretation of Islamic texts that condemned all innovation in belief and ritual subsequent to Muhammad. Among other things, it outlawed the veneration of saints and saints' tombs.

Expelled from his native region, 'Abd al-Wahab sought refuge with a tribal chief, Muhammad ibn Saud, who espoused the new doctrine and undertook its propagation. In a short time, the movement grew in influence as more and more tribes joined; some came peacefully, others were conquered in battle. By the

⁸ It should be noted that one state in the Middle East, Turkey, in the 1920s had banned all religious brotherhoods and orders. Today there is an effective retreat from this extreme position. Sufi orders that had persisted underground since the edict are now more open in their activities, and new ones have arisen, such as the Fethullah Gülen Community Movement (discussed in this section).

beginning of the nineteenth century, the Wahabis were so strong that they attacked Karbala in Iraq, Mecca, and even Damascus. Alarmed, the Ottoman government sent a special expedition that succeeded in defeating them and forcing them to retreat to their original area in eastern Arabia.

The movement then entered a period of retrenchment and general decline until 1901, when a descendant of Muhammad ibn Saud, Abdel 'Aziz (henceforth ibn Saud), leading a small Bedouin force, succeeded in capturing the oasis of Riyadh, the present-day capital of Saudi Arabia. From his base in Riyadh, ibn Saud proceeded to enlarge and consolidate his domain, and by 1915 he had become the master of most of Arabia. In 1932, ibn Saud declared himself king of his newly formed kingdom, named Saudi Arabia after his family, and strict ultraconservative Wahabism became the only Islamic doctrine to be tolerated within its borders. Ibn Saud died in 1952, leaving a legacy of 37 sons and the nucleus of a modern government and administration. Today, ibn Saud's sons and their sons have a lock on the oil-rich country, occupying as they do all important political and economic positions. The descendants of Mohammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahab, known as *al-Sheikh*, also occupy privileged positions as jurists, religious leaders, and consultants to the Saudi clan.

The great wealth derived from oil after World War II and especially since the mid-1970s, together with the massive influx of non-Saudi Arabs and other foreigners, has created social and political contradictions on a scale hard to comprehend. Wahabism, which espouses a nonmaterialistic, almost ascetic way of life, is increasingly hard to reconcile with the vast wealth and flagrant consumerism that has transformed the lives of all Saudis and has led to unprecedented riches in the hands of the royal family. While the Saudi clan retains virtually total control over all sources of political, military, and bureaucratic power, their claim to legitimacy rests, paradoxically, on their espousal and propagation of the puritanical Wahabi creed. This legitimacy is increasingly suspect in the eyes of many. The seizure of the Great Mosque in Mecca, the holiest in all Islam, by a group of Muslim zealots in 1979 bore testimony to the growing gulf between ideology and practice in Saudi Arabia. More recently, a London-based Saudi opposition group set up a Web site on which sermons of dissident Saudi *'ulama* are disseminated.⁹

The Shadhiliya Order of Egypt

The example of the Shadhiliya is best viewed in the general context of religious orders in Egyptian society. The following account is based on a book by Michael Gilson (1973) in which he examines the history and evolution of religious orders in Egypt, and specifically one urban *tariqa*, the Hamidiya-Shadhiliya. As Gilson writes, religious orders have always been an integral part of urban

⁹ For a now classic account of the formation of the Saudi Kingdom, see H. Philby (1928). For an excellent article on the Saudi state today, see Ghassan Salame (1993, pp. 579–601).

society, and many are considered to be well within the mainstream of Sunni Islam and are tolerated by the *'ulama*. Such was the importance of these orders that their leaders came to wield great influence in the society in their dual role as educators of the young and intermediaries between the common people and the rulers, who were most often non-Egyptians: Turks, Albanians, and Circassians. Until the nineteenth century, the religious orders were very much a part of Egyptian common life, woven as they were into its social fabric.

The profound changes that transformed Egyptian society during the nineteenth century affected the Sufi orders as well. By the twentieth century, the majority of them were moribund and marginal. Gilson attributes the decline of the orders in Egypt to their loss of traditional functions and their concomitant inability to respond constructively to the challenges of a quickly changing social system. Rapid urbanization, the shift from subsistence farming to cash crops, and the increased dependency on world markets led to the emergence of a landless peasantry and the creation of a wage-earning class. As the state took over the function of education and trade unions slowly replaced the old craft guilds, the leaders of the Sufi orders came to lose their base of moral influence and power. They no longer played a key role in education, and their previous ties to the craft guilds ceased to be important. Their power was further undermined by their loss of revenue under land reform laws that confiscated much of their property.

The Hamidiya-Shadhiliya order, founded by Salama Musa (1867–1939), seems to have been an exception to the general decline. The order managed to grow in membership and hold its own against the competing Muslim Brotherhood, an activist religiopolitical movement that sought to establish an Islamic state based on the Shari'a. Gilson attributes the success of the Shadhiliya to several factors. One is that its founder was himself a member of the new bureaucracy and at the same time learned in the Islamic tradition. In establishing his order, Musa drew upon his administrative experience to create an efficient organization in which a cadre of trained and highly disciplined followers controlled each lodge. A charismatic figure and a reputed performer of miracles, Musa could simultaneously appeal to the clerical workers in the modern sector, to wage laborers, and to peasants.

In the difficult environment of urban Egypt, the order provides "elements of mutual support and benefit, of psychological and material security in a fraternal circle built on cooperation and equality" (Gilson, 1973, p. 206). With its strong emphasis on mutual help and personal discipline, the order offers the individual a sense of identity and security within the difficult environment of contemporary Egyptian society. The well-organized network of lodges suited the needs of workers and lower-level clerical employees, who often found themselves living away from their relatives and community in a confusing and impersonal setting.

The Nur or Fethullah Gülen Community Movement¹⁰

Our third example is perhaps the most intriguing. The Nur or Fethullah Gülen Community Movement emerged from obscurity only in the 1980s in Turkey, but today it is one of the fastest-growing Islamic movements in the Middle East—numbering untold thousands of adherents, managing hundreds of schools, two universities, publishing houses, a sports club, and with a presence on three continents. It is estimated that over 200 high schools are operated by Nur community adherents in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, Egypt, Kenya, Albania, Romania, Macedonia, Russia, the United Kingdom, Bulgaria, and the United States, not to mention over 100 schools and a private university in Turkey itself. While having deep roots in the Sufi *tariqat* tradition, leading spokesmen say that although it represents a new form of Sufism, it is not a *tariqat*. In fact, they avoid labels and names altogether and state rather that what they offer is not *tariqat* but *hakikat*, or "truth" (Kömeçoğlu, forthcoming). This is a classic example of what sociologists and political scientists call "social movements." In social movements, informal networks of individuals and groups with multiple objectives spread and coalesce until they come to acquire a collective identity, control significant resources, and coordinate activities. The Fethullah Gülen movement has its intellectual basis in the 12 volumes of *Risale-i Nur* (Treatise of Light) of Said Nursi (1877–1960) and in the writings, sermons, and public lectures of his charismatic interpreter, Fethullah Gülen. The core adherents are drawn primarily from two sources, the elite, represented by business leaders, financiers, and professionals; and university students, small-scale merchants, and tradesmen, with the former providing resources, particularly in the early stages of the movement, and the students being the most active in propagation of the Nur doctrine, or *Nurculuk* (Turkish).

In order to understand why a movement lacking a formal organizational or institutional structure and one whose adherents need no formal initiation is seen as hugely attractive in some Muslim circles and as threatening by many secularists, followers of leftist parties, and the Islamist establishment, one has to understand just how novel the movement's approach to Islam is. The innovation of Said Nursi, referred to by his large circle of immediate followers as *Bedi-uzzaman*, or "The Wonder of the Age," was both to break with the Sufi *tariqat* as well as chart a path distinct from his contemporary highly politicized Islamist reformers who advocated an anti-Western struggle. He broke from Sufi tradition in that far from ignoring the external world, he urged his disciples to embrace the modern age and its scientific accomplishments while striving for

¹⁰ This discussion is largely based on the unpublished analysis of Uğur Kömeçoğlu, as well as on his forthcoming article (2000), which was shared with us in galley form. We are deeply grateful for his insights and intellectual generosity (but absolve him of responsibility for any errors!); we also draw on the considerable media coverage given this movement in Turkey. For an insight into the basis of the movement's doctrine, see Şerif Mardin's (1989) authoritative account of Said Nursi's life and works. For writings by Fethullah Gülen, see his 1993 and 1995 books in English.

their inner spiritual development. He also broke from the *tariqat* tradition of teaching whereby a sheikh disseminates his esoteric knowledge verbally to a relatively small number of disciples. Said Nursi, writing often from jail or exile, communicated by typed or printed word, so that by the end of his life he had reached large numbers of people throughout the Turkish-speaking world, even though his writings were long proscribed by the authorities.

While Said Nursi was a right wing political activist in his early career, he came to believe that the quest for specifically Islamist government and the implementation of the Shari'a was futile and misplaced. He advocated inner enlightenment through reason (*akıl*) and openness to the Divine Will, and that active politics should not be allowed to impede individual religious development. One becomes a follower simply by reading his works and discussing them with others. Those who study the collected works closely and speak knowledgeably are referred to in the idiom of the movement as *şakirt* or *talebe*, that is, "students," terms that have come to distinguish a core of activist followers who spread the doctrine.

The influence of Said Nursi continued to grow after his death, but the catalyst for its explosive growth was very largely the work of Fethullah Gülen, a charismatic teacher and superb organizer. Gülen was born in 1938 in a village near the eastern city of Erzurum. Both his mother's and father's families were sayyid, and he studied Arabic and Persian with a relative who was also a senior cleric. He attended both a religious seminary, *medrese*, and the *tekke* of a Sufi order. Gülen never met Said Nursi, who died when he was 22, but at about that time he was officially appointed by the Directorate of Religious Affairs to teach in the main mosque in the western city of Edirne—one of the major clerical positions in Turkey. At this point he began expanding on the Nur metaphysical message of universal love, rationality, tolerance, and the compatibility of religious interests with the secular world. A hint of his complex worldview can be seen in this brief passage:

Man in this world is the representative of two different powers, namely the spirit and the flesh . . . they are usually observed to conflict in such a way that the victory of one results in the defeat of the others. . . . When one sacrifices the enjoyment of material pleasures one grows perfect as long as one can stay free from selfishness and self-seeking—living only for others.

In this view one does not abandon the world or worldly concerns but struggles to make them secondary to spiritual development (Şahin, 1992, in Komeçoğlu, forthcoming).

While the doctrinal message is obviously more complex, the passage draws attention to what attracted many young intellectuals and members of the business community who were seeking to reconcile their religious beliefs with the demands of modern life. The movement's appeal was soon evident among students in secular high schools and universities and among leading business figures in the western portion of the country. During the pre-Gülen period, the Nur

movement spread primarily by means of Nur-run houses, in which Said Nursi's treatises were read and studied. In the early Gülen period, these increased greatly in number, and, taking the name "houses of light" (*işık evler*, a play on the fact that *nur* means "light" in Arabic), apartments were organized by the hundreds as residences for university students, with three to five students of the same sex rooming together and following a Nur-inspired Islamic lifestyle as they pursued their secular education, frequently at the nation's foremost universities. Some Islamists term the movement elitist because they are prominent in the best universities. A sense of *cemaat*, or community solidarity, was inculcated, not through explicit proselytizing but through the emulation of core followers, the *şakirt* or *talebe*, by those drawn into their intellectual, work, and social orbits. The Gülen principle was to spread the message to those who showed an interest, but in particular for adherents to behave in ways that made them role models in their behavior at work or school. Those attracted to the Nur doctrine as expounded by Gülen formed a hierarchy within the community, consisting of the *şakirt* or *talebe* at the top, the second level *kardeş* (brother/sister), followed by *dost* (friend), and, finally, the *müsta'id* (sympathizer with the potential of becoming a "friend"). Fethullah Gülen, for all his emphasis on individual development still plays a very traditional *shaykh*-like role as final arbitrator on issues of doctrine, policy, and collective action.

The current, very public, and controversial phase of the Gülen movement, in Uğur Kömeçoğlu's view, started in the mid-1980s when the movement began to open high schools and university preparatory schools across the country with money donated by wealthy followers. This had a number of consequences, not the least of which was that these private schools began to earn significant revenues, enabling further expansion and the awarding of even more university scholarships. Also, even though these schools follow a strictly secular curriculum, mostly taught in English, the administrators and many of the teachers are Gülen followers who attract still more new adherents. By the end of the 1980s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the movement was poised to expand into the new Central Asian republics and abroad elsewhere where Muslim populations existed and where governments permitted such schools to open. Each school is expected to found sister schools, again on the Nur-Gülen principle of self-sacrifice and of making Islam's message known by deeds and socially useful behavior. University graduates, much like young members of the Church of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), are to do public service as teachers, and increasingly are performing this duty in foreign countries. One prominent financier in the movement in 1996 said that there were over 250 high schools and over 7000 young teachers abroad.

The movement has continued to grow both in numbers and public impact. In Turkey, senior government officials, including the president, have publically embraced the movement's leaders, much as the president of the United States regularly seeks out prominent religious figures. There is no doubt, too, that some officials see the movement's influence in Central Asia as in the national interest, and regard its spread among Kurdish speakers useful as well. But the

movement and its leader are also sources of political contention. Turkish parties of the left are suspicious of the movement's secretive association with the business community; hard-line secularists find its appeal to Islamic values threatening; some conservative Islamists find the emphasis on rationality and the accommodation with secular modernity hard to accept—not to mention that the Nur doctrines go far beyond the traditional vision of an Islamic community. In fact, Turkish Islamic extremists have targeted a number of prominent Gülen supporters for torture and assassination, including a woman writer who was a powerful voice for an expanded role for women in Islam. And, of course, the military and other state political institutions are deeply suspicious of a movement over which they have little control. Recently, the Turkish government took steps to restrict the number of students allowed to attend the movement's Fatih University, near Istanbul. As of this writing, Fethullah Gülen is in the United States, ostensibly for medical treatment but perhaps not coincidentally at a time when there have been calls for an inquiry into his presumed influence among the police and other sectors of power.

These three cases illustrate some of the divergent ways in which Sufi *tariqas* have evolved and their quite distinct functions in different social and political contexts. Of course, Sufism is not limited to its expression in any specific *tariqa* or order, or even in any specific set of beliefs and practices. Rather, at its core it represents a shared attitude concerning the individual and his or her relationship to God.

ISLAM IN DAILY LIFE

In this and the preceding chapter, we have discussed the origins of Islam in western Arabia and its core of belief and distinguishing ritual. We have also sketched the history of its transformation into a world religion embracing different peoples and a variety of cultural traditions. We have noted its schisms and the variety of its expressions in the political and social spheres. However, this is not a book on Islamic civilization, nor is it a contemporary history of the Middle East. What we hope to convey is a sense of Islam as part of people's daily life and something of its role in Middle Eastern society. In short, we are interested in Islam primarily as a living cultural tradition.

As we noted at the beginning of Chapter 2, all too often the terms *Islam* and *Islamic Civilization* are invoked to "explain" a whole range of phenomena. These include political instability, oppression of women, economic underdevelopment, national xenophobia, and a host of supposed psychological attitudes, such as fatalism, rigid conservatism, and dependency. Such a simplistic perspective takes us back to an earlier period in history when Christians and Muslims vied with each other to control the Mediterranean and viewed each other in stereotypic religious terms.

Just as Christianity is not invoked to explain features of Western societies, such as colonialism, racism, and the Holocaust, Islam likewise cannot be considered as determining all the characteristics of societies in the Middle East. However, as with Christianity and Judaism, Islam provides a shared set of symbols and meanings that people use to identify themselves, to impart meaning to their lives, and to express certain aspirations. Islam thus remains the single most important source for the ethos that distinguishes the area and imparts to its bewildering complexity and variation a measure of unity and cultural uniformity. From this perspective, the role of the Muslim preacher, or imam, as the transmitter of religious knowledge and values assumes a special significance.¹¹

Richard Antoun has pointed out that the imam acts as a

culture broker who selects from and interprets an enormous corpus of religious ethics to a less sophisticated audience of co-religionists; but who, on the other hand . . . is constrained by and selectively incorporates the local customs accepted by his audience. (1993, p. 607)

Antoun studied religious life in a Jordanian village over a period of 30 years and analyzed the contents of the religious lessons (*dars*, pl. *durus*) given by the imam at the local mosque. The *dars* is conducted informally every Friday (before the congregational prayer) by the preacher, who sits on the floor and lectures to a circle of listeners on a topic inspired by the Quran or Hadith. The lesson lasts about 20 minutes, and listeners are free to interrupt and ask questions. In teaching Muslim ritual, ethics, and history, preachers stress the normative unity of the Muslim community, or *umma*, and underscore its common ethos, as Antoun illustrates in the following example, which we have adapted:

In the course of one lesson, the preacher spoke of equality, and described the just leader as *al-imam al-'adil*, one who insures that everyone receives full and equal justice, and he quoted the Quran and the Hadith as his proof texts:

O Mankind! We created you from a single [pair] of a male and female. And made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other. (Not that ye may despise each other.) Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is [he who is] the most righteous of you. (Quran 49:13)

There is no distinction of non-Arab ('ajami) over Arab except as to piety. (Hadith)

The preacher spent the remainder of the lesson describing other attributes of model Muslims whose emulation would lead to salvation.

Two weeks later the preacher again spoke of justice: "Justice involves reconciling opponents, giving honest testimony even against self and kinsmen and giving the right (*al-haqq*) to its possessor without diminishing it." The just ruler raises the case of the oppressed (as his own), and does not show partiality between his children and his wives. He again used the Hadith and the Quran as his texts:

¹¹ See also Patrick Gaffney (1994).

The sultan is the shadow of God on earth. If he does justice, he has an eternal reward and from his flock thanks. If he oppresses, sin (wizr) falls on him, and his people must be patient. If government tyrannizes, the heavens bring drought. If the giving of alms is prohibited, the flocks perish. If fornication manifests itself, poverty and destitution appear. If the pact of trust is broken [between ruler and ruled] the unbelievers (kuffar) triumph. (Hadith)

If two parties among the believers fall into a quarrel make peace between them. But if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the others then fight ye [all] against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of God; But if it complies, then make peace between them with justice ('adl) and be fair (uqsitu); But God loves those who are fair and just. (Quran 49:9, 614)

WOMEN AND RELIGION

Traditionally, women's religious activities have centered around all-female private gatherings to study the Quran and the Hadith and regular pilgrimages, *ziarat*, to shrines and cemeteries. In recent years, young urban women have begun to seek a more visible and active role in religion as they strive to construct a contemporary Muslim female identity and to participate in reshaping their religious tradition in the context of today's global world. While in the past women's contribution to the development of Islamic thought and ritual has been largely ignored and unrecorded, this is beginning to change:

There is a new Islamic zeal developing in relation to women, which is evident in a female Islamic movement and involvement. Many aspects of women's life situations have become the province of Islamists by means of educational control and religious involvement. . . . This has affected the arena of traditional religious rituals, the religious socialization of the new generation, and educational opportunities for the young. (Kamalkhani, 1998, p. 178)

During the mid-1990s, Zahra Kamalkhani conducted fieldwork in an Iranian city to study the transformation that has taken place in the religious education of women since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. In the effort to reshape Iranian society, the Islamic state viewed girls' religious education as an important mechanism for the transmission of Islamic values and norms. Toward that end, the state opened a theological college in 1994 for training female preachers and ritual leaders. Today a system of Islamic universities, colleges, and schools is in place throughout Iran. This has resulted in a widespread "Islamic literacy," which increasingly is blurring the traditional boundaries between the textual and normative tradition of Islam (hitherto the province of the male religious elite) and the practical or popular understandings of Islam as a lived tradition.

The so-called "popular" Islam often identified with the nature of beliefs among ordinary Muslims (in particular women) has become interwoven with organized higher education and re-articulated both in the local and national context. The

establishment of new theological schools and religious curricula and the exception of customary religious arenas and events has brought women more than ever into the active religious field. (p. 189)

Kamalkhani describes a new type of religious activity that has developed—an all-female meeting called *rowzeh*. At one such meeting she attended, held in a newly opened public religious hall (*hosyneh*), which had been constructed and donated to the community as *waqf* by a wealthy woman, three differently ranked female preachers presided over the well-attended meeting. One preacher instructed the women on Muslim ritual, and a second discoursed on Quran commentaries, known as the *tafsir*. The third preacher, who was a young woman in the final phase of her studies at a religious college, performed a cycle of religious lamentation songs, *noheh*, honoring one of the martyred imams.

The lamentations were broadcast on a loudspeaker and could be clearly heard outside the hall on the street. This was an obvious breach of Islamic traditional teaching, which forbids men from listening to the voices of women reciting the Quran or any other religious text. When Kamalkhani expressed her surprise about the fact that the female preacher's voice could be heard by men in the street, the young woman replied that "it was necessary to give merit to all her listeners on such a holy day," and that the religious message she preached took precedence over gender segregation and over the taboo on women's religious voices being heard in public (p. 181).

As Kamalkhani notes, the influx of religiously educated women into public arenas signals a new era in the evolution of Islamic knowledge. Highly educated and articulate female preachers and teachers attract large audiences that include women of all ages and class backgrounds; while some of these preachers may use their position to disseminate and reinforce state-approved messages, others who are politically neutral are in a position to provide alternative versions of what the role and comportment of believing Muslim women ought to be. In either case, what is important to bear in mind is the new religious space that the Islamic regime of Iran has, wittingly or not, opened up for women.

Another example of women's participation in religion comes from Turkey. As we mentioned earlier, in 1925, the Turkish government banned Sufi orders and closed their lodges and the shrines, *turbe*, of saints and renowned sheikhs. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the government began to relax its restrictions on religious orders and some shrines were allowed to reopen. Catharina Raudvere (1998) studied women's participation in the Sufi order of Halveti-Cerrahi in Istanbul during the mid-1990s. The order, founded in the eighteenth century, has a unique status in Turkey in that it is officially recognized today, albeit under the designation "Society for Traditional Turkish Music and Folklore." The following discussion is based on Raudvere's account.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the order was languishing and its membership was limited to a few older men who met weekly to perform the *zikr*, devotional

prayers of remembrance. This changed in the 1980s; under the leadership of a charismatic and dynamic sheikh, and with the rising influence of Islamist movements, the order experienced a revival and expansion. The disciples of the order, *murids*, men and women, meet three times a week at the lodge, which serves as a place of devotion and social interaction. Raudvere distinguishes two groups of women members who regularly attend the *zikr* ritual at the lodge. One is made up of elderly and middle-aged women whose attendance is part of long-established family tradition. More recently, they have been joined by a group of young, educated women, university students and professionals. These women have joined the order out of personal choice, just as they have adopted the head scarf and the modest attire of a long skirt. Every Thursday night, the women enter the lodge through a separate door from the men, and go directly to their quarters on the upper balcony while men gather on the main floor. Separated by space, men and women perform the *zikr*. The women remain seated throughout while the male initiates may rise, form a spiral, and move in circles. Once a month, the women come together for a ceremony of their own without any men present. These ceremonies are led by two women appointed by the sheikh of the order. On this occasion, the devotional prayers are very emotional and are often accompanied by body movements and even dancing. After the ceremony, the women linger to talk, drink tea, and share snacks (p. 136).

The women initiates and others who participate in Sufi orders express a type of piety that is generally condemned by both Islamists and secularists in Turkey. For the Islamists, the Sufi orders are seen as encouraging "superstition" and un-Islamic behavior; the secularists, on the other hand, fear the networking and organizational capacities of the orders and view them as potential vehicles for political activity. Raudvere concludes:

Being a young female dervish (Sufi initiate) in contemporary Istanbul is to claim both tradition and modernity. The normative discourses founded in the Koran and the Hadith offer transhistorical claims which are used to defend a variety of positions. However, in a rapidly changing social context—a steadily growing metropolis with social turbulence and political turmoil—interpretation of the holy texts is an absolute necessity to be able to construct an urban Muslim identity. . . . In the midst of this are women's lives. Nevertheless, being a religious woman is not any longer equivalent to ignorance and powerlessness. It can certainly mean resistance to authoritarian Islam. (pp. 140–141)

GENERAL OVERVIEW

We must emphasize here that Islam is not inherently a force for any particular course of action or development, whether for an authoritarian form of government or a democratic one, a socialist or a free-market economy. What Islam does, as Christianity or any universalistic faith does, is to construct an intellectual and cultural environment in which actors can choose from among myriad

behavioral options. One should be wary of imputing collective traits, tendencies, and attitudes to such abstract categories as race, religion, civilization, or peoples. Islamic culture in the Middle East, however defined, is shaped by its own regionally varied history, as well as by its present realities. At this level, some scholars have found it useful to speak not of "Islam" but rather of "Islams," in order to underscore the existing variations in time and place. Just as Islamic culture in Iran is different from Islamic culture in Egypt or in Malaysia, Islam within Iran is expressed differently and plays different roles among different segments of society, whether defined in terms of region, ethnic group, or economic class.

What the anthropological perspective on Islam as culture might best offer is not further analytic distinctions, which, in effect, tend to establish normative Islam in opposition to Islam in practice. Rather, it should encourage us to see Islam as simply being what people who profess it believe and do. In this sense, Islam is neither moribund nor a relic of the past any more than are the people themselves. Islam can be as much a form of revolution as it is of conservatism, a power for justice as well as a tool for oppression. It can liberate as well as constrain. In Iran, in 1979, a despotic regime was overthrown by the unity forged by the Shi'a *'ulama* among disparate segments of society through shared Islamic symbols. Today, the future of the Islamic revolution and the course of the country's development are being shaped by new interests and forces expressing a widely shared democratic impulse.