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Sufism and Muslim Society in Laterday Islam



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The emphasis of Islamic studies was traditionally put on the early centuries of Islam. But muslim creed, theology and law, the formation of which took place in those centuries, are not enough in themselves for the understanding of modern muslim society, as was generally thought. Indeed, late medieval Islam carried with it a heavy load of *sufi* (mystical) influence not envisaged perhaps by the early theologians, and laterday muslim society was moulded by sufism more than by theology and law.

In this process of change it is perhaps significant to note that the most active and influential sufi order in laterday Islam — namely the Naqshbandi order — was originally founded in Transoxiana, and in its second phase in India. In other words in what was then the periphery of the world of Islam.

For many centuries the heartlands of Islam radiated influence far and wide. But in laterday Islam, those lands were largely receptive and let themselves be influenced religiously to a considerable extent by the muslim periphery. In other words, in the recent centuries the heartlands of Islam lost their former central place in the spiritual and theological fields in favour of the periphery. The sub-centre came to possess the lead.

The movement about which I am working — namely the Nagshbandi-Khâliidi sub-order — is an example of this process. It was carried, in the early decades of the 19th century, from India into the Ottoman Empire which incorporated the heartlands of Islam since the 16th century. The hearer of the movement was a Kurdish shaikh called Mawldna Khâlid

(d1827) of Shahrizn in Kurdistan. Within a span of 16 years shaikh Khâlid trained many deputies (*khaltfas*) who carried the message of the order into many regions of the Ottoman Empire and far beyond. In this way this movement left a lasting impact upon those regions.

The Khâliidi sub-order belongs to the Mujaddidi line of the Nagshbandi order. This order is distinguished by its emphasis on orthodox Islam, and by exhorting its followers to lead a life strictly according to the *sunna* of the Prophet, and to fulfill exactly the ordinances of the *shari'a* (muslim law). Following the spread of such teachings among wide sections of muslim society a religious revival took place wherever this movement took roots, and a renewed activism passed over this society.

This movement coming from the east started to penetrate the lands of the Ottoman Empire at a time European influence had begun to reach the shores of the eastern mediterranean countries. The encounter between those two great movements left middle Eastern society under much strain. As a result this society suffered from a clash of social and cultural values. The political and military expansion of Europe did not help to ease this tension. On the contrary it had perhaps aggravated it. Indeed middle eastern society still suffers from a deep social and cultural dichotomy, of which, to my mind, it would not find a way out without the recapturing by the heartlands of Islam of the spritual and theological initiative.