



The Distracted Sufi

The Naqshabandi tariqa in Jerusalem

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Writing in the 17th century, Indian Sufi Ahmad Sirhindi replied curtly to an inquiry into the contemporary viability of his chosen faith:

I got your letter wherein you have put some questions. Normally, a question that reflects arrogance and prejudice does not deserve an answer. But I will ignore it and try to reply. If it does not benefit one, it may benefit another.

Your first question was: "How come the early Sufis wrought a lot of miracles, but the Sufis of our age hardly show any?" If by this question you want to deny the merits of present day Sufis, because they work few miracles, as it appears from your question, God may save us from the insinuation of Satan.¹

While we are not informed here of how Sirhindi satisfied his interrogators (other than intimating they might go to hell) the query that so aggravated him has echoed repeatedly in the ears of the standard bearers of mysticism in the Islamic faith. How does 'our' temporal world translate to the mystical ideal? The Naqshabandi *tariqa* (Sufi order), characterized by its silent *dhikr* or means of meditation, faces a particular challenge today; its practitioners worry that the noise of modern life threatens to drown it out.

"To think of God is getting harder," says Sheikh Abdel Aziz Bukhari. "Myself, I am thinking of God, and there the telephone is ringing." Still, Bukhari and his family and a small group of followers continue to meet once a week in Jerusalem's Old City, along the Via Delorosa, in the home bought by his great-great-grandfather when he arrived in Jerusalem from Bukhara, Uzbekistan. Sheikh Rasheed ibn Othman al-Bukhari traveled to the holy city as a missionary in 1616, reflecting the wandering diplomacy common among Sufis. The home/cultural center he established became a local safe haven for visiting Indians, Iranians and Pakistanis, and others drawn to the Sufi life. Bukhari's grandfather, Sheikh Yacoub Rasheed al-Bukhari, kept a visiting book, and the number of guests, says Abdul Aziz, numbered 400 to 500 a month.

These days, however, the visitors are few and far between. The inaccessibility of Jerusalem and the local dominance of more literalist schools of Muslim belief have isolated the Sufi sect.² Sometimes the small group of Naqshabandi followers share worship time with a nearby Alawiya group³ in *Zawya Afghaniyya* (the Afghan community). While Bukhari can list a handful of Sufi paths represented in Jerusalem's Old City, only the Naqshabandi and Alawiya *turuq* continue to meet regularly in an organized fashion.

The name 'Naqshabandi' comes from the

words for 'carving' and 'heart', says Bukhari. He uses that presumably manufactured etymology⁴ to describe their particular Sufi practice, which is a silent repetition of the many names of God - chanting the words but also becoming intimate with their meaning. Constance Padwick's study of Muslim prayer-manuals offers this description of what a Naqshabandi follower should do before reciting his own line of connection (*silsila*) to the prophet:

*First the faithful must free his heart as much as in him lies from all evil thoughts [sic], must face the qibla [the direction of Mecca] and sit in the proper posture for prayer; must close his eyes, and direct all his senses to the side of the fir-cone (sanabar, stone-pine) shaped heart. Then he must confront (mutawajjih) God as present in all His greatness and love. (Manuscript prayer bought from a street hawker in Istanbul.)*⁵

The Naqshabandi *dhikr* is meant to tie the heart, the mind, and the tongue in worship, say its practitioners, and with rehearsal, that worship is to be carried through all activities of daily life. "I should be able to sit and talk to another person," says Bukhari, "while my heart is saying, 'Allah, Allah...'" Mindfulness is maintained through the practitioners' constant counting of the number of repetitions.

Like other Sufi orders, the Naqshabandi trace their learning through a *silsila* or specifically, the 'golden chain'. According to Naqshabandi tradition, upon the Prophet Muhammad's ascension to heaven in the night journey, he was offered a vision of all of creation and entrusted with maintaining its purity. When the prophet worried that this was too great a burden for him alone, he was

shown another vision of 7,007 Naqshabandi saints (*awliyya*), then 313 more of added purity, and then another 40 saints to whom would be disclosed the secrets of the chain. "At the hands of these saints everyone will be healed from his wounds, both externally and internally," explicated Sheikh Nazim al-Haqqani (b. 1922). "These saints will be able to carry the whole Nation and the whole of Creation without any sign of tiring. Every one of them will be the *Ghawth* (Arch-Intercessor) in his time, under whom will be the five *Qutub* (Spiritual Poles)."⁶

When the prophet was pleased and asked God for more, he received a vision of yet another 124,000 prophets who would also come to his aid. With the help of Abu Bakr, Muhammad's close companion and later the first caliph, all of these holy men were called together and initiated in the secrets of the golden chain before Allah that same night.

While the Quran itself offers scant detail about what Prophet Muhammad is said to have experienced on the 26th night of the lunar month *Rajab*, there are accounts in the *hadith*, or the sayings attributed to the prophet, that describe his journey on the back of the winged quadruped, *Buraq*, and ascension through the seven heavens to paradise. Still, none of the sources considered the backbone of mainstream Islamic thought include the Naqshabandi account, and it appears that this Sufi group has, like numerous other mystical sects and writers, offered their own hermeneutics to the story of *Israh wa il Miraj*.

Abu Bakr, then, is considered the Naqshabandi link between the Prophet Muhammad, subsequent saints and the man believed to have founded the Naqshabandi order in the 12th century. Through its exegetical rendition of the Night Journey and Abu Bakr's reported preference for a silent *dhikr*, the *tariqa* establishes its credentials to the source revelation of Islam

and its first holy men.

Histories have named Abu Yacoub Yusuf al Hamdani (d. 1140) as the initiator of the Naqshabandi *tariqa*, and his spiritual successor, Abdel Qalaq al-Gujdawani, as the Sufi responsible for developing the entirely silent *dhikr* and its form of breathing (*habsi-dam*). At that time, the *tariqa* was referred to as the Kharajawan. Six successors later, most of them located in the region of Bukhara, Muhammed ibn Baha-iddin an-Naqshabandi (1318-1389), also from the Bukhara region, 'named' the *tariqa*, gathering around him devotees who then spread the Naqshabandi way throughout the Caucasus and Anatolia, Kurdistan and India.⁷

According to tradition, the young Shah Naqshaband had several discussions with God about the future of his *tariqa*.

I had been asked [by Allah]... 'Why are you going to enter on this Path?' I answered, 'In order that whatever I say and whatever I want will happen.' I was answered, 'That will not be. Whatever We say and whatever We want is what will happen.' And I said, 'I cannot do that. I must be permitted to say and to do whatever I like, or I don't want this Way.' Then I received the answer, 'No, it is whatever We want to be said and whatever We want to be done that must be said and done.' And I said again, 'Whatever I say and whatever I do is what must be.' Then I was left alone for fifteen days, until I was overwhelmed with a tremendous depression. Then I heard a voice, 'O Baha'uddin, whatever you want, We will grant.' I was overjoyed. I said, 'I want to be given a Path (tariqa) that will lead anyone who travels on it straight to the Divine Presence.' And I experienced a great vision and heard

*a voice saying, 'You are granted what you have asked.'*⁸

It was not much later that Shah Naqshaband reportedly received the secrets of the golden chain after stopping to pray at a Bukhara graveyard. "I sat facing the *qiblah*, meditating and connecting my heart to the heart of that sheikh. During this meditation a vision was opened to me and I saw the wall facing *qiblah* come tumbling down." Naqshaband saw before him a vision of the *tariqa* founder al-Gujdawani, who advised, "[A]djust the wick of yourself in order that the light of the unseen can be strengthened in you and its secrets can be seen. You have to show constancy and you have to be firm in the *sharia* of the Prophet in all your states."⁹

According to Naqshabandi tradition, the 'spiritual inheritance' of the *silsila* is passed from one sheikh to another when the *tariqa* leader secretly selects his successor as he approaches his deathbed. No one is informed of the choice, which is eventually revealed in the heart of the chosen successor, and then disclosed by him to all. In the interim, the *tariqa* is led by an agreed-upon guide.

Despite this key chain of inheritance, the Naqshabandi tradition is hardly institutional in its hierarchy. Naqshabandi initiates, as in other Sufi traditions, commonly moved from one sheikh or another, seeking guidance in achieving a sought-after higher understanding. Often, the initiates lived the lives of ascetics, and would go into periods of isolation and supplication for months, even years, at a time. Sheikh Abdullah al-Fa'iz ad-Daghestani (b. 1891, in Daghestan) was not inure to the real-world implications of his chosen path as he described his first seclusion, which lasted five years:

I was a newlywed of only six months when my Sheikh ordered me to enter seclusion for five years. My mother was so unhappy [that] she went to complain to my Sheikh, her brother, about it. My wife was also unhappy, but my heart never complained...I entered that seclusion with orders to take six showers every day with cold water, and to keep all my obligations and daily devotional practices (wird/dhikr). In addition, I was ordered to read at least seven, and up to fifteen, sections of Qur'an and to repeat the Holy Name of Allah 148,000 times and prayers on the Prophet 24,000 times daily.

*There were many other practices as well, all to be performed in a focused and meditative state. I was in a cave, deep in a large forest, high on a snow-covered mountain. One person was assigned to serve me with seven olives and two ounces of bread every day. I entered that seclusion when I was fifteen and a half years old, and I was quite fat. When I emerged from that seclusion at twenty-two years of age, I was very thin, weighing only 100 pounds.*¹⁰

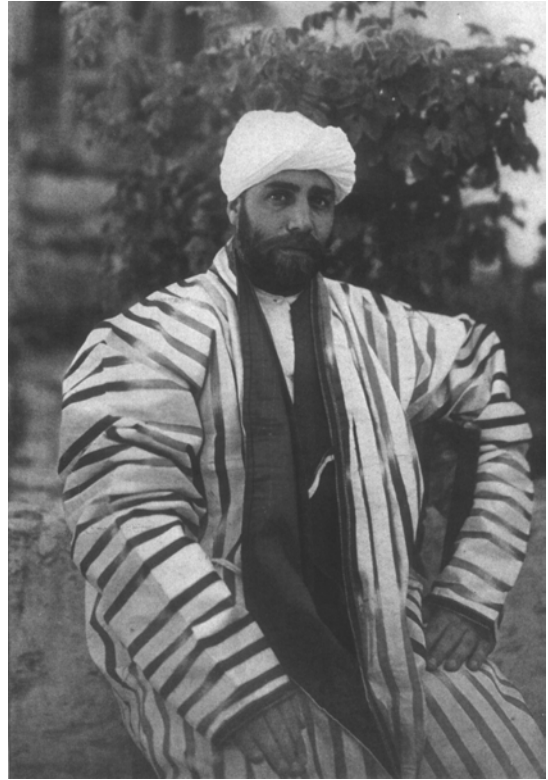
Here in Jerusalem, Sheikh Abdul Aziz Bukhari receives his guests on a cool room off the family *liwan* (central courtyard). The sitting area is lined with family heirlooms, precious antiques from Uzbekistan and photographs of his father and grandfather. An ornate silver toothpick is printed with the words "Smordan and Co.". From a wooden display case, Bukhari pulls a pair of spectacles. "These belonged to my grandfather. Once, I wasn't paying attention and I knocked them over and broke them. That day I cried."

In the room, too, are books, handwritten Qurans in Arabic and translations from Arabic to Turkish and Persian. Bukhari's ancestors sat during Ramadan and copied the Quran as a means of developing their faith. The texts they wrote have been displayed as a collection in various venues.

One photo that stands out is that of Sheikh Yacoub Rasheed al-Bukhari with Jerusalem Mufti Haj Amin Husseini. Not only was the Uzbek center a meeting place for the religious and learned, it was also site of numerous political gatherings and reconciliatory talks, among these mediations between the senior and oft-competing Husseini and Nusseibi Jerusalem families. Bukhari tells the story of how Sheikh Yacoub sometimes performed as the body double for Haj Amin. Knowing the British were watching his every move, Husseini would arrive at the Bukhari home surrounded by his guards, and then slip out the women's entrance to a secret political rendezvous, while Sheikh Yacoub exited through the main door surrounded by Husseini's entourage.

This lineage is conveyed by Bukhari with a quiet pride, and when the conversation turns to faith, again Bukhari emphasizes the future of that lineage: teaching his sons and daughters the Naqshabandi way. "Muslims all believe in Allah, but for Sufis there are steps to come closer to Allah," he explains. "God has 99 names - *Ya Moin, Ya Satar*. These 99 names are steps to keep a link with God. When you are walking, eating, drinking, to keep that link you must be a Sufi."

It is that connection between the mundane and the mystical that embodies the Sufi philosophy. At the same time, the crossing of boundaries between the 'known' and the 'unknown' world is precisely what opens mysticism to challenges like that posed to Sirihindi so long ago. While the *tariqa*'s collective memory of the *awlia* emphasizes



Sheikh Yacoub Bukhari, in traditional dress, Jerusalem, 1927. Source: *National Geographic*, Maynard Williams.

the saint's visions and otherworldly encounters, here and there glimpses of a contemporary self-image emerge. It is a minority, rejectionist perspective that yearns for an idealized past. "You must know that there is great wickedness in the world," ad-Daghestani said in the early 20th century to Englishman James Bennet. "People have given themselves over to the worship of material things, and they have lost the will and the power to worship God." Ad-Daghestani proceeded to advise Bennet to keep his own beliefs a secret to help facilitate his spreading of the Sufi message among the English and overseas.¹¹

As much as visions and miracles are a part of the Naqshabandi narrative, they seem out of the realm of today's world. - and that is no unfamiliar observation, according to Sufi historiography. No matter when 'today'

is, the physical boundaries of the here and now make it difficult to believe in the otherworldly promise of mysticism, even for those who go down the Sufi path, and despite the accounts of those who have traversed the divide.

Perhaps Sheikh Naqshband had the invulnerable answer for those believers who would question the possibility of mystical experiences in contemporary life. “What more miraculous powers do you want,” he said in the 14th century, “than that we are still walking this earth with all these sins upon us and around us?”¹²

Endnotes

¹ Muhammad Abdel Haqq Ansari, *Sufism and Shariah: A Study of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's Effort to Reform Sufism* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1986), 244-245. Quoted in Johan Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 197.

² That is not to say that Sufi practice has died in Palestine. For example, in Ramallah's Old City and Jalazoun refugee camp, a group of Sufis meets periodically to practice a *dhikr* of chants and circular movement. While its numbers have decreased in the last decade, the group still manages a cross-generational crowd of more than twenty.

³ A North African branch of the Shadhiliyya “sober” Sufi order.

⁴ I was unable to find this explanation of the name anywhere else, and most histories say that order's name comes from Muhammed ibn Baha-iddin an-Naqshabandi.

⁵ Constance E. Padwick, *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer Manuals in Common Use* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1996), 60.

⁶ <http://www.naqshbandi.org>, Extensive information about the Naqshabandi order is available from several official websites, established by various branches of the *tariqa*, an interesting testimony to both the group's

continuing missionizing focus and how Sufism has developed in the technological world.

⁷ J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 62-63.

⁸ <http://www.naqshbandi.org/chain/17.htm>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <http://www.naqshbandi.org/chain/39.htm>.

¹¹ It is interesting here that, although the Naqshabandi *tariqa* is Sunni, it also carries elements of Shiism: the threatened perspective of a minority, even to the extent that it may be considered legitimate to hide one's beliefs, or the investment of continuing prophecy in the line of saints, for example. One might point out the subsequent and proximate development of the Shia Safavid Dynasty in what is today Iran. French scholar Henri Corbin has argued, too, to great dissent, that Shiism is simply an 'external' form of Sufism.

¹² <http://www.naqshbandi.org/chain/17.htm>.