

Bridging Sufism and Islamism

ALIX PHILIPPON

Founded in Jhang, Pakistan, in 1981 by maulana Tahirul Qadri, the Minhajul Quran (MUQ - the method of the Quran) is not *per se* a Sufi order even though the structure of the organization, its ideology and functioning does betray strong Sufi influence. Reformist, this movement inscribes itself in the activist wave of modern Islamic revivalism without denying a strong sense of belonging to the Sufi tradition. At first a religious organization aimed at preaching, educating and providing welfare, the MUQ has turned overtly political in 1989 through the creation of a party, Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT). It contested general elections before withdrawing from electoral politics after the leader decided to resign from his seat at the National Assembly in October 2004, seemingly in strong protest against Musharraf. In more than two decades, the movement has become a trans-national politico-religious organization numbering, besides those in Pakistan, more than 25000 members in more than 20 countries, and sympathizers in more than 80 countries -mainly of Pakistani background.

The MUQ describes itself as a "revolutionary movement of revivalism." It has a rationalized organizational model with a strict hierarchy inspired from the biggest Islamist movement of Pakistan, the Jamaat-i Islami. It has been active in re-islamizing Pakistani society from below through a chain of educational institutions, active preaching activities, and the diffusion of the thought of Qadri through hundreds of titles ranging from religion to science in the shape of books, tapes, CDs, and an extensive use of the Internet.² The same tools are used to spread the

Sufism, perceived as the mystical strain of Islam, and political Islam, labelled as Islamism, has often been presented as quite simply antagonistic both by Muslim actors as well as by scholarly discourse. Recent studies have however, emphasized the fact that the frontiers between the two are far more ambivalent and porous than is generally thought.¹ A Pakistani based Islamic politico-religious organization has tried to reorganize these categories of Islam in a religious reformulation granting centrality to Sufism, thus challenging the stereotypical representations of reformism in its society.

message abroad. Most of the centres in the "West" have been set up as spontaneous initiatives from Muslims of Pakistani origin won over by the message and the interpretation of Islam given by Qadri and who felt the need to organize community centres in order to consort and practise their faith together according to these guidelines.

By its organization and activities, the MUQ does not differ much from other Islamist movements in Pakistan. Its specificity in the Pakistani context is its effort to create institutions in which the spiritual energy and the values associated with Sufism can be channelled in socializing sets. Qadri has reclaimed spirituality as the specific stamp of Islam and as the true representative of the subcontinent's cultural ethos. He is therefore very defensive as far as Sufism is concerned. *Mahfil-e sama* (spiritual recitations) including qawwali music and dhikr recitations are regularly held in the headquarters in Lahore, and one can download recordings of *naats* (praises to the Prophet) and spiritual music, be it Abida Parveen or Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, from the web site. Folk and pop music is also available online. The concept of intermediation, which is at stake in the ongoing debate among Islamic groups, is being defended as a legitimate practice in Islam. Although critical of some ritualistic aspects of the cult of the saints, the members of MUQ do perform *ziyarat*, tomb visitation, which is, to them, the "granite foundation" of the beliefs of the *Ahl-e-Sunnah*. The values of peace, love, tolerance, and brotherhood, identified as Sufi, are promoted as universal references informing the ideology and the modes of action of the organization. The great Sufis are perceived as role models and mysticism as a tool to be used for the ethical reformation of the people in order "to bring peace, harmony, and humanism in society." The greater jihad, the process of self-purification, is the prerequisite for the lesser jihad, whose aim is to purify social and political evils.

Thus, the enemy is clearly identified as the "Wahhabi" trend, which tends to promote a purified Islam while rejecting traditions and customs associated with Sufism and to "monopolize the rhetoric of religious legitimacy."³ Identified by the leader of MUQ as being a deviation of Islam, it is charged with promoting terrorism and extremism, two evils foreign to Sufism. Qadri was one of the few *maulanas* of Pakistan to have taken a strong stance against Bin Laden. In a country where there is a nexus of the sectarian and jihadi groups with mainstream Islamist organizations, MUQ and PAT seem to have offered an alternative to many Muslims, mainly Barelwis. They have reacted to the construction of the new Islamic identity and thus religiosity, based on an exclusive idea of purity, which have characterized Pakistani activism and militancy mainly since the beginning of the 80's

Spiritual dance during a qawali session, Pakistan, 2005



PHOTO BY ALIX PHILIPPON, 2005

and have promoted a path of “moderation” in rejecting radicalism. For them, revival is not synonymous with conflict, violence or opposition to the West, but with cooperation and dialogue among cultures and religions, with ethical reformation, and with modern and Islamic education. The organization of Qadri has thus tried to avoid sectarian divides in conceptualising an ideology based on universal values.

A charismatic leadership with a Sufi twist

“Shaykh,” “Leader,” “*murshid* (guide)” are a few of the numerous expressions used to designate Tahirul Qadri. His work has consisted in composing a complex partition of competences and registers of legitimation where the religious, political, academic, and spiritual domains have together composed a unique symphony of power. A prolific author, a respected religious leader, a leader of a political party and of a trans-national organization, a lawyer, a poet, a Sufi venerated by his devotees, Qadri shows his followers the countenance of an absolute guide endowed with great authority.

Within his composite leadership, the Sufi repertoire is of particular interest, for it reinvents a contested tradition, though still very much alive in Pakistan—that of the *pir* (Sufi), whose resources Qadri mobilizes in a modernizing way. A disciple of a Qadiri Shaykh (Pir Tahir Alauddin Al Gilani) under the spiritual guidance of whom he has placed his organization, Qadri has always refused to assume the responsibility of spiritual succession, stopping short of ever initiating disciples through the traditional vow of allegiance-*bai'at*. By doing so, in his own words, he has avoided becoming the rival of all other pirs of the country as well as limiting himself to this traditional status. Therefore, the procedures for membership have been modernized: filling a form is the only requirement, along with a fee. In a way, the traditional authority of the Sufi has been converted into a modern leadership. Notwithstanding, Qadri makes it clear to his followers that a faithful and active commitment within the organization makes them automatically disciples of the tariqa Qadiriyya and that they become the disciples of Abd al-Qadir Gilani. Therefore, if the members are not “disciples” *per se* of Qadri, his own initiation within the Qadiri brotherhood operates as a spiritual channel providing a relay back with the original founder of the order. But most members consider Qadri as their true spiritual leader, the one who can help and guide them, very often through dreams. Furthermore, the leader keeps promising his devotees a place in paradise. As such, he does claim the power of intermediation of a *wali Allah*, a friend of God. This spiritual bond is a strong incentive for activism: members deploy their energies often voluntarily to keep the organization working, especially in the MUQ centres abroad, and donate their money to finance its numerous activities. Therefore, if Qadri is the “patron-in-chief” of an NGO, the leader of a political party and is not a traditional Sufi master as such, for he does not wish his organization to become a Sufi brotherhood, the charismatic element is still dominant in the construction of his authority.

The 2005 spiritual tour of MUQ

Even if not actualized for the sake of modernization, the master/disciple scheme remains the prevalent form of authority within the movement. Last summer, I had the opportunity to join a “spiritual tour” where 250 members of MUQ from the European diaspora accompanied their leader to Syria and Turkey for two weeks. We visited the tombs of great Sufis (such as Ibn Arabi and Rumi), pre-Islamic Prophets (such as Yahya and Zacharia), and illustrious characters of Islamic history (companions, family members of the Prophet, and Umayyad Caliphs). As I have witnessed, the devotion, love and *adab* the members displayed towards their guide recalled the ones traditionally owed to a Sufi master. For example, during the qawwali sessions organized in Damascus, Konya, and Istanbul, Qadri was performing the duty of a traditional shaykh, mediating between the qawwals and the audience, and between them and God. Some members were dancing in honour of the Shaykh with ferocious and spontaneous joy in a style more reminiscent of *bhangra* (Punjabi folk music and dance) than of the whirling dervishes. They sometimes prostrated at his feet in a display of emotion and respect. Labelled as “the true representative of the Holy Prophet” in the present age during a speech delivered by a senior MUQ officer from England, Qadri was presented as an intermediary taking people closer to the Prophet, representing all the Sufi orders, and showering the grace of past Muslim scholars onto all those following his “mission.” For example, Qadri made of all the present members of the congregation the “intellectual disciples” of Ibn Arabi during a ceremony held at his shrine in the Syrian capital city.

Two *mahfil-e sama* were also organized with Syrian Sufis of the Shadhiliyya while in Damascus, where dhikr as well as musical spiritual sessions were held. One Syrian scholar, Shaykh Yaqubi, had visited the organization in Lahore in May 2004 during the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet. Following this visit, Qadri was honoured with the title of *shaykh-ul islam* by Syrian religious scholars, such as Ustad Shaykh Assad Asghar, a *muhaddith* and imam at the Umayyad mosque, and scholars from the Shadhiliyya. Qadri was thus acknowledged as none less than the leading religious authority in the present era. This title was bestowed on the basis of his spiritual qualities, his achievements in the fields of education, preaching, as well as his religious and intellectual productions. This validation by Arab religious leaders has considerably enhanced his prestige among his followers and worked as a legitimation tool both in Pakistan and abroad.

A Sufi attempt to build a new political modernity for Islam?

The ideological system of MUQ has been established on the basis of a critical approach to Islamism in its relation with Sufism. It shows an awareness of the fact Sufism has been excluded from the symbolic resources of Islam by many Islamists. It also acknowledges the corruption within some Sufi practices and the necessity to come out from traditional institutions and evolve a modern form of organization. It is critical of the doctrines and actions of what they call “Wahhabis” and has taken into account the way this category of Islamists has shaped Western opinion on Islam. In other words, it has rationalized the terms of the heated ongoing debate about Islam, modernity, and the West and tried to evolve a suitable alternative evolving Sufism as a cultural, ethical, intellectual, and political resource for the Muslim world.

Despite the ups and downs of its history, PAT has attempted to reconcile the Islamic symbolic system with the values of political modernity. A partisan of *ijtihad*, the independent reasoning and interpretation, Qadri believes that Islam is a “dynamical process and an evolutionary system.” For him like for other Islamists, Islam is at the same time a comprehensive code of human conduct, and the legal and symbolic basis for a socio-economic and political order. However, the fact that the name of the party does not include “Islam” is a conscious decision to differentiate this political formation from other “religious” parties.

Opposed to any sectarian position, PAT has made an effort towards inclusiveness, and it is open to Shites as well as Christians. In the frame of the debate about whether Islam is compatible with democracy, the leader of PAT has made a point that the Islamic paradigm is convertible into the modern political idiom evolved in the West. His will to reduce antagonism with Western thought has led him to claim, like the father of Islamic reformism Muhammad Abduh, that “Islamic State means a pure democratic State,” even though there might be differences in interpretation and definition. There is a common set of institutions and values shared by both systems: pluralism, human rights, equality, social justice were all present, according to him, in the *nizam-i mustafa*, the political system built on the model of the Prophet’s community. “All things which West wants are already in Quran,” says Qadri. In a way, PAT has secularized the Islamic principles to make them compatible with the conceptual framework of political modernity. Inscribed in a context of globalization and tense national debate, the ideology of MUQ has probably worked successfully at conquering new religious markets. As for PAT, it has so far seemingly failed in mobilizing the masses.

Notes

1. Thierry Zarcone, *La Turquie moderne et l'Islam* (Flammarion: Paris, 2003).
2. <http://www.minhaj.org>.
3. Carl Ernst, *Shambala guide to Sufism* (Shambala publications: Boston, 1997).

Alix Philippon is a Ph.D. student from L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques d'Aix en Provence. Her M.A. thesis, “Sufislamism: the paradoxical invention of a new political modernity in Islam? The Pakistani case study of Minhaj-ul Qur'an” was written in 2004 under the supervision of François Burgat.
Email: alix_philippon@hotmail.com

Furthermore, the leader [...] does claim the power of intermediation of [...] a friend of God. This spiritual bond is a strong incentive for activism...