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Sufism: An Alternative to Extremism?

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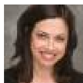

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Articles & Testimony

In the search for alternatives to Islamist extremist ideologies and violence, the traditional and historical Islamic practices of Sufism may offer part of the antidote.

On a quiet street parallel to the old city of Marrakesh, behind a large, beautifully crafted wooden door, is the Munya Association for the Preservation and Revitalization of Moroccan Heritage (Munya). It is little known, but for the founder and patrons, this small cultural association is a front line in the battle against Islamist extremism.

I visited Munya one evening in early February. A group of twenty teenagers were seated in a semi-circle of chairs facing a young man donning a red skullcap and draped in a djallaba, the traditional robe worn by men and women throughout North Africa. He was teaching them to sing -- or, more precisely, to chant.

My host, Jaafar Kansoussi, told me they were "chanting poetry about the Prophet, and about a journey they wish to take to Mecca. But the lyrics continue that if they cannot get there physically, they hope to get there spiritually through love."

These themes of love, spirituality, and journeys infuse traditional Muslim mysticism -- Sufism -- which Munya is trying to revive through its music festivals, art classes, and seminars. "The blending of art, music and religious consciousness," Kansoussi explained, "is meant to internalise the religious experience, to recapture a certain humanism that was present in traditional [Islamic] musical culture. In this way, music becomes a way to access the divine."

Sufi traditions have been under sustained assault in the Muslim world since the onset of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's revivalist movement in the late 18th century. Followers of the movement, who prefer the term Salafi to Wahhabi, consider most Sufi practices -- including the designation of certain Sufi leaders as saints, the musical celebrations of the Prophet's birthday and rituals performed at the tombs of Sufi masters -- heretical innovations

that must be eliminated. As Wahhabism spread beyond the Arabian Peninsula over the last two centuries, the first casualties were often the Sufi shrines and meeting places.

In Morocco, the assault gained momentum in the 1970s and 1980s under Hassan II (the current monarch's father) who did little to block the import of Wahhabism, principally through Saudi-funded schools and mosques. But since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, and a terrorist attack in Casablanca two years later, King Mohamed VI has sought greater regulatory control over the religious realm, purging Wahhabi-leaning preachers from mosques, removing controversial lessons from religious education curricula, revamping the system of training imams, and promoting Sufism. The Minister of Religious Affairs since 2002, Ahmed Tawfiq, is a Sufi.

My host Kansoussi is also a Sufi, and was responsible for the Marrakesh region's 6,500 mosques from 2004-2011 under Tawfiq. He stresses that "'traditional' or 'historical' Islam [is not] the Islam Wahhabis point to when they claim to be reviving true Islam. On the contrary, Wahhabis are thoroughly modern in their approach."

For Kansoussi, traditional Islam is not recognisable in Wahhabi rigidities. It is instead in the rich and varied cultural, intellectual and aesthetic experiences of Muslims stretching back fourteen hundred years. He finds this in Marrakesh in the colourful calligraphy and woodwork lining the souk of the old city, he hears it in the Andalusian melodies seeping into Sufi gatherings.

Kansoussi sees the revitalisation of Sufism's inward-looking religious consciousness as an antidote to the coercive religious ideology embodied in Wahhabism and other extremist strains of Islamist thought. "Today, Muslims face two options: either the historical Islam, resting on art, music, the aesthetic, the communal form that was joyous... or the modern, highly politicised form." And yet, the very apolitical nature of Sufism -- perhaps the tradition's greatest strength -- may also be its greatest weakness if it is marshaled to counter an extremist religious ideology. It doesn't seem like a fair fight to combat coercive and ultimately violent ideologies with talk of reaching the divine through love.

Kansoussi is under no illusions that the activities of his organisation, or Sufism more broadly, can save the Muslim world on their own. For one thing, Sufism itself has not been immune to extremism: witness the Sufi-affiliated Naqshbandi Army, a violent insurgent group in northern Iraq, or Mumtaz Qadri, the self-confessed killer of Salman Taseer in Pakistan who was associated with a Sufi order there. For another, though it has deep roots throughout the Muslim world, Sufism enjoys its greatest public awareness and acceptance in North Africa.

Sceptics might bemoan the limited reach of an approach like Kansoussi's, but I'm not so sure. Morocco's Minister of Islamic Affairs belongs to a Sufi order, as does the rector of Zaytouna University in Tunis, and the sheikh of al-Azhar in Egypt, and Abdallah Bin Bayyah, a prominent anti-Wahhabi sheikh based in, of all places, Saudi Arabia. Literalism will always have its admirers, and there is undoubtedly a core of extremists who will never be swayed. But it is also true that literalism thrives (in part) through discrediting and destroying the alternatives. For Kansoussi, Sufism embraces myriad alternatives, and every young person he attracts to Munya is one less attending a Wahhabi imam's sermon preaching incitement.

In the ongoing debates over how to respond to extremist Islamism, too little attention has gone to the vast and deep repertoire of Sufi philosophy, rituals and even artistic production, which accompanied the most enlightened centuries of Muslim civilisation. If anything, the initial efforts on the part of mainstream Muslim theologians to respond to literalist interpretations of scripture have implicitly accepted extremists' insistence on reducing the religious tradition to a single set of texts. Laudable and necessary as these responses are, there is something disconcerting about the Grand Mufti of Egypt rejecting extremist interpretations of Quranic verses because they do not represent "true" Islam -- as if there really is only one authentic way to be 'truly' Muslim. The potency of Sufism may lie in its ability to remind Muslims (and non-Muslims) that, more than the literal words of a holy text, Islam has

for fourteen hundred years been a lived experience, with all the cultural and intellectual variation that implies.

At last month's White House summit on countering violent extremism, President Obama urged attendees to develop strategies to combat the ideologies, supporters, recruiters and funders of extremism. As policymakers in the West debate these strategies for countering groups like ISIS, they would do well to think creatively about supporting the promising efforts already underway in the region. If, in President Obama's words, "we need to find new ways to amplify the voices of peace and tolerance and inclusion," then helping organisations like Munya would seem a good a place to start.

Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article originally appeared on the website ***Religion & Geopolitics (http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics)*** *, a project of the Tony Blair Faith Foundation.* ❖

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