

Faith-based Communities and their Activities in Relation to the Spiritual Ideal of Unlimited Love:

Sufi Communities in Fes, Morocco

Paper presented for the “Works of Love: Scientific and Religious Perspectives on Altruism”
Conference Villanova University May 31- June 5, 2003

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Among Sufi brotherhoods in Fes, the acquisition of knowledge of God involves active peace making, and the accomplishment of good works. Sufi study groups involve both men and women who live by the social welfare ideals inherent in Islam and which constitute the core of Sufism – the sharing of capital for redistribution to the less fortunate, voluntary good works for the benefit of others, civility driven by faith in Divine Love. This study seeks to illuminate the extent to which Sufism is responsible for the perpetuation of civility and mutual welfare in a densely populated urban center of over a million people. Based on my field research in Fez, Morocco, this study examines the extent to which the principles of Sufi devotion to Divine Love guide the course of daily activities and choices made by individuals in Fes. Participation in a Sufi community carries with it an inherent commitment to Sufi principles of peace and love; these are guides for a peaceful social order in the region.

My initial aim in conducting fieldwork in Fez was to find evidence of Muslim women’s scholarship within the framework of traditional education systems. I did not go to Fez to study Sufism, as many Westerners do. But from my first visit I was struck by a sense of place unlike that of any other. Having lived and worked among Muslims in northern Nigeria, Niger, Ghana, and Sierra Leone, I am familiar with living conditions and social organization similar to that of Fez. Furthermore, I have traveled in southern and southeastern Morocco for research, and encountered in those regions devout Muslims who received strangers amiably. But Fez is different from all those places, and I wanted to explore the reasons for its difference.

In the eighth century the great grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Moulay Idriss, established the independent kingdom of Morocco on the plain of Saiss, near the Roman capital of Volubilis. The son of Moulay Idriss, Idriss II (b. 791), inherited his father’s kingdom at birth. Traveling in the north in 799, he was charmed by the verdant valley that was to become Fez, where an ancient holy man welcomed him. Idriss II established a city on the bank of the stream that fed the area.¹ It is said that when Fez was being established in the tenth century, prayers were offered for its protection. Interestingly, earthquakes (the latest in the 1960s) have not harmed it or its inhabitants, who agree that it is a special, benevolent place.²

Two precepts form Sufi attitudes toward others: “Each one is a treasure” and “The best of service to all”. These are active Sufi principles of behavior and attitude in Fez, Morocco, the land

¹ A golden ax, a *fas*, was found during excavation for the city walls. This discovery led to the decision that a human sacrifice was necessary for each city gate to be protected by a resident spirit, a tradition common throughout the world at the time. Two Persian exiles, *fars*, were buried alive at each gate in this city which was thereafter known as Fez; citizens are Fassi. It is significant that this is not the story recounted by contemporary citizens of Fez, who prefer the version described above, more in keeping with a benevolent Sufi Islam.

² Among the suicide bombers in Casablanca in May of 2003 there was one by the name of al-Fassi, indicating that his ancestors were from Fes although he himself had been raised in Casablanca. Inhabitants of Fez affirm that Fez is a peaceful place, but some warn that the fundamentalist Islamic movement is trying to infiltrate, taking advantage of the beneficent nature of the place.

of a thousand saints, whose tombs adorn the countryside. It is said there are 12,000 saints in Fez – that is, 12,000 saints currently *living* in Fez. The truth of this, of course, is unquantifiable, but the belief attests to an attitude that Fez is indeed a charmed city. Sidi Harazem of Fez (circa 12th C), was Morocco’s first Sufi master. In contemporary times Sufis from all over the world flock to Fez to settle and study with Sufi Sheikhs there, even if only for a short time. Fez has from its inception been acknowledged as a city of law, literacy, and artistry. It is recognized as the intellectual capital of Morocco, famous for its Karouine mosque and library, a center of learning since the Idrissid period (8th – 11th C), and a magnet for those who seek deeper understanding of Islam, especially through Sufism.

Ihsan, the science of Sufism (*tasawwuf*), operates on its own specific laws, which guide the worldview of its followers. These are central to an understanding of Sufism, and illuminate perspective on modes of behavior in Fez, where Sufism is so deeply ingrained. There is a hadith – a saying of the Prophet Muhammad - that ihsan is the compassionate response to needs. The principles of ihsan bear out this perspective. These principles, which are familiar to citizens of Fez, consist of fourteen points, outlined here:

1. **purification of the heart from the whisperings of Shaytan;**
2. **purification of the heart from conceit** (*'ujb*) (in areas of choice: prayer, fasting) (in areas of no choice: beauty, power, lineage);
3. **purification of the heart from pride** (*kibr*) (inward, unmanifested: pride) (outward, manifested: arrogance, expressed in action);
4. **purification of the heart from false hope** (*amal*) (prevents from hastening toward tawba) (“I will act later, I have many days ahead.”);
5. **purification of the heart from anger** (*ghadab*) without grounds: 3 degrees of anger: insufficient (*tafrit*) (not able to protest against haram); excessive (*ifrat*) instills lack of insight; effects= change of color, intense shaking at extremities, confused speech, foam at mouth, redness, ugly demeanor; effect on tongue: say what you regret, effect on limbs: wound without consideration; effect on heart: resentment, envy); moderate (i *'tidal*) this is praiseworthy anger; re: middle way, straight path
6. **purification of the heart from envy** (*hasad*) how can you blame someone for what God has bestowed ? several levels including wanting blessing to be taken from a person, wanting blessing to disappear to equalize your situations, wanting blessing for self, not that it be removed from another person – in the case of faith, this is good;
7. **purification of the heart from showing off** (*riya*) which corrupts the heart: with body, dress and appearance, words, actions, associations; remedy by avoiding love of being praised, acceptance of pain of criticism, absence of greed for what others have;
8. **turning away with regret from all actions of rebellion** (*tawba*) help in three parts; remember: end of ugly wrong actions, intensity of God’s punishment, weakness of the body. Wrong actions are of three types: abandoning obligations to God, wrong actions between you and God, wrong actions between you and slaves of God;
9. **doing without in this world** (*zuhd*) (of superfluous things): abandon seeking what is lost in this world, part from what you have of it, abandon will and choice;
10. **safeguarding out of fear** (*taqwa*) stages: safeguarding from : idol worship, acts of rebellion, innovation, avoiding superfluous;
11. **trust in God** (*tawakkul*);
12. **entrusting the affair to God;**
13. **contentment with the decree of God** (“no affliction occurs except by permission of God”);

14. **fear and hope** (*khawf* and *raja*) – hope for His mercy and fear of His punishment.

This last point reminds us of the lesson given by one of the world's first Sufis, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyya (eighth century) of Basra in Iraq. The story is told of her running through the streets of Basra with a pail of water and a torch, demonstrating her wish to douse the flames of hell and set fire to heaven so that people would worship God not out of fear of punishment or yearning for pleasure, but out of love of God alone. Union with God in Divine love is the aim of Sufis, who are consigned to live in the world without becoming attached to it.

The treasure of Fez is not in its structure but in its people. Fez does seem to be protected by higher powers. It is said that a hadith conveys the expectation that the salvation of Islam will come from the West, which word translates in Arabic as "Maghreb", "Morocco". Natural disasters seem not to visit the place. But it is not pristine; last January we shivered in temperatures in the teens, with no indoor heating. Its summer heat rivals that of Kansas in the 100s, with no air conditioning. There is some garbage in the streets, and the medina shows the wear of a thousand years of residence. People are not deliriously happy; the lucky ones work menial jobs for a pittance, unemployment and illiteracy rates are high. Poverty is pervasive. But the average Fassi has a keenly developed sense of love of humankind and a certain calm light in the eyes. There is no question that a visitor will be welcomed, housed, and fed, for as long as she wishes to stay. One is welcomed like family. A spirit of generosity, peace, and satisfaction pervades the atmosphere. It is inconceivable that a taxi driver will over charge or waylay a passenger; he is more likely to take you home for lunch – or the weekend. A café waiter offers you his apartment in the medina for the duration of your stay; he will move back home with the family, no problem. A chance encounter with a merchant in the medina can lead to a friendship with his sister. In her eagerness to direct you to the medrasa she will see you through the experience of meeting and working with other women, or teaching the details of hammam procedure for ritual cleansing. Naturally this will involve a visit through the labyrinthine alleys of the medina to her family home, where her mother and aunt will receive you and want to know about your family, work, and frame of mind. A Sufi sheikh welcomes you to his home as a companion of one of his students, offering tea and an overwhelming display of sweets. The workers at the tire shop expect a daily visit for your daughter to check on the dusty kittens in the back, and the cyber café people say "no problem" when you do not have the right change to pay. They will get it from you next time; or not. This ancient city has a small town atmosphere because of the benevolence of the place. Even those in the more modern Ville Nouvelle section are touched by, and therefore exhibit an unlimited generosity with their time, attention, resources and concern for others. Part of it is standard Moroccan hospitality, but beyond this, Fassis exhibit a deeper warmth. And this warmth draws a person into the active family network that exists for each person in Fez. Strong family ties mean that the regular past-time activity in Fez consist of visiting and sharing meals with extended family several times a week.

But how can benevolence be measured? Kindness is unquantifiable. I was curious to know whether Moroccans also feel that Fez is special, so I asked as many as I met. To a person, the response was affirmative, and the reason always given immediately was Sufism: "What else could a Sufi city offer but generosity?" people would respond. Then the stories began to confirm the perception: Fez was protected by prayers during its establishment in the eight century, so it is untouched by natural disaster; an earthquake in the 1960s did no damage, killed no one; it is protected, in a valley, an ancient protectorate of saints; 12,000 living saints in a city of one million – odds are that a taxi driver is one of them. People's perceptions of their own city affirm a sense of privileged place, peace, security. It is no wonder that the annual Festival of Sacred Music held here each June draws international crowds; the place is magnetic. The medina is surrounded by crowded graveyards, constant reminders of mortality. This is surely a place where

people have not forgotten God, where they live by Sufi precepts, like these outlined by Turkish Sufi Jelaladin Rumi:

1. In generosity and helping others be like a river;
2. In compassion and grace be like the sun;
3. In concealing others' faults be like night;
4. In anger and fury be like a corpse;
5. In modesty and humility be like the earth;
6. In tolerance be like the sea;

and the final, mysterious exhortation:

7. Either exist as you are or be like you look.

Indeed Sufism demands a certain etiquette in dealing with people. This etiquette is modeled on imitation of the Prophet, of whom his wife said his morals were the Qur'an; the Prophet Muhammad is called "an exalted standard of character" in the Qur'an (68:4). Shaykh 'Abd al Aziz al Dabbaegh (d. 1717), a Moroccan, explained that "humans reflect divine qualities like mercy according to the measure that they have been recipients of this quality from God" (Hoffman 1995: 146). The unlimited generosity shown to my ten year old daughter recently in Fez overwhelmed her. One night she confided that when our friend Layla had taken off her black onyx necklace and put it around my daughter's neck, beaming, saying, "She is my sister", my daughter felt terribly guilty because she had nothing to give in return. As I tried to comfort her I realized that my words reflected what I had learned from living in Fez: that her smile and hug of thanks was more valuable to the giver because she was giving a part of herself, which could never be taken from the giver, and was truly valued. Sufis say that you must give that which you value the most to develop your character; a gift that is not your best is no gift at all. Reinforcing the point, the same night of our conversation, I read to my daughter Sura 3:180:

And let not those/Who covetously withheld/of the gifts which God/Hath given them of His grace./Think that it is good for them:/ Nay, it will be the worse/For them: soon shall the things/Which they covetously withheld/Be tied to their necks/Like a twisted collar./On the Day of Judgement.

Thus are we owned by our possessions, both now and forever. As I shared this with my daughter she smiled in recognition and said, "Oh I get it, giving a gift to someone is like giving a gift to yourself!" This is exactly the way it is in Fez. Good etiquette builds character; more importantly, it improves the soul and the spirit.

Ibrahim al-Dasuqi, the 13th century founder of a central Sufi order in Egypt, notes that "Just as the people of the Shari'a void prayer when it is done in a corrupt form, the people of the *Haqiqa* [that is, people of the Ultimate Truth, the Sufis] void prayer accompanied by corrupt morals. If a person harbors hatred, envy, a bad opinion about a Muslim, or some other such defect, his prayer is void in their opinion. All of these are signs of love of this world, and whoever loves this world is veiled from the presence of God and expelled from entering it". This is cited in Valerie Hoffman's 1995 work, Sufism, Mystics, and Saints in Modern Egypt. She goes

on to quote Shaykh Abu 'l Wafa' al-Sharqawi (d.1961), saying "One way Satan has crushed the majority of disciples and corrupted their hearts is that they think that etiquette is merely an external matter. However, this pillar is an act of God and a way to draw near to Him" (146). Sufis are required to place the interests of others before their own, and consider themselves "...members of a single body, in which all suffer when any one suffers. A disciple should offer his brothers the very best food" and treat their brethren with honor, for each helps the other find his way to eternal happiness; "Love for the brethren is the sum of all secrets, and is the source of graces and lights" (Hoffman 1995: 148). Another Shaykh cited in this work carries this lesson about etiquette to the family, advising his disciples in patriarchal Egypt to treat their wives courteously, to wash and dress well for their wives, and to keep them informed of their business. In the West this may seem ordinary, but in Egypt it can be a challenge for a man to consider himself to be on an even playing field with his wife. Hoffman notes, "The attention the Sufis have devoted to proper etiquette often has a profound effect on their daily interactions, especially within their own group" (149).

This lengthy discussion on etiquette is necessary to an understanding of the atmosphere in Fez. Fassis have a Sufi worldview, which is benevolent and patient. Morocco's new Secretary for Islamic Affairs is a Sufi, as is his Assistant Secretary, who comes from Fez. Fassis are encouraged by this, especially in a time of suicide bombings attributed to al-Qaida followers. The Fundamentalist Islamic movement is trying to get a foothold everywhere, and Morocco is a special target. Many Muslims consider Sufism suspect³, while al Qaida fundamentalists seek to take advantage of the welcoming atmosphere of Morocco in general and Fez in particular, infiltrating and "reforming". Whether the Sufi stronghold of Fez will withstand these threats remains to be seen, but the strength of the heart and the effects of love are formidable opponents. Stephen Post describes love as the genuine giving of self resulting in the discovery of a higher self. In Fez, this is merely what is expected on a daily basis.

The precepts of Sufi philosophy, and thus the guide for daily life and interaction, follow sociologist Pitirim Sorokin's outline of the dimensions of love. Sufi behavior toward others involves a sense of love that is: highly intense, extensive, enduring, pure, disinterested, and fully integrative (cited in Post, pp, 32-33).. This perspective is founded on the belief that all one is or has comes from God; the good is to be shared, the bad is meant to be instructive. Sufi love fulfills every aspect of Post's definition of love for others:

[Love is] an affirmation that leads us to take an interest in others, to be attentively present in a manner that is undistracted and respectful, to be actively concerned with their well being, to listen to them with care, to be loyal to them in life's journey, to act on their behalf with courage and fortitude, to delight in their successes, and to expect nothing in return. (41)

With everyone "playing by the rules" of Islam unfettered by hierarchy, Fez can be a place where people feel secure and welcomed. The community as a whole believes in a philosophy of dependence on God, and the obligation to treat each individual as a gift from God. More importantly, no one clings to material possessions, but understands that what God has provided must be shared. The philosophical basis of a Sufi community is by definition altruistic. It is focused on the heart and the spirit, not on status or possessions. The citizens of Fez truly believe in and act on the perspective that "Each one is a treasure", and provide "the best of service to all".

³ The attachment to a sheik seems to go against the Islamic precept of a direct personal link to God, and the worship of God exclusive of others. Sufis maintain that a sheikh is never worshipped, but only functions as a guide in spiritual development.

[Handbook on Islam, Imam, and Ihsan. Trans. From Ar. By Aisha Abd Ar Rahman al-Tarjumama of Al Kitab 'Usul ad-Deen (The Roots of Life Transaction) and Al Kitab Ulum al Mu'amala (The Sciences of Behavior) by Shaykh Uthman dan Fodio. Suffolk, England Diwan Press, 1985.]

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