Sufism is a distinct form of Islamic mysticism that is supposed to unite the code of Islam and the spiritual realm for its followers and practitioners.1 By the phrase “the code of Islam,” I aim to refer to the “do's and don'ts” of Islam that are taken from the Koran and its interpretations, both by experts and by believers’ own consciences. Religious belonging requires more than do's and don'ts however; thus, Sufism provides an arena in which the individual may practice spirituality in religious organizations promising esoteric or exoteric experience, with some sort of relation to religion as well. The appearance of some Sufi groups promising Islamic teachings and spiritual practices in the experience of Western adults seems to offer both an understanding of Sufism in the West in general as well as an understanding of the relation between Sufi spirituality and Islamic codes in Western everyday practices in particular.

My aim here is to discover Sufi spirituality and the code of Islam in the everyday practices of people who frequent to a Sufi group in Milan. Obviously, these two frames are not necessarily intended to exclude each other, but they usually do so. Therefore, it is important to see how these

---

1 Sufism is defined as a form of “Islamic belief and practice in which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God. It consists of a variety of mystical paths that are designed to ascertain the nature of man and God and to facilitate the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom in the world” (“Sufism.” 2012. Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Retrieved 16 January 2012 from http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/571823/Sufism). There are various approaches to classify the main streams and periods in Sufism. In order to have a typological understanding that would make sense in sociological terms, a beginning point might be the distinction made by Gilsenan (1973: 1): “It has followed two main streams. The first, beginning in the early centuries after the Prophet Muhammad's death, is that of individuals who felt a call to the mystical or devotional life. The second ... is the corporate pursuit of the ‘way’, the tariqa (pl. turaq), by groups of Muslims who came together in the Sufi Brotherhoods following one of the great Saints of medieval Islam.” For a short introduction see Chittick 2000; for a more thorough work on Sufism and Sufi Orders, see Trimingham 1998.
two frames are negotiated in the everyday practices of the members of the group. I have chosen the group in Milan for its wider life-chances because of its ethnically heterogeneous make-up and the acceptability of a female researcher by the group, where women and men have been experiencing liturgies together for some time. The stories of the interviewees presented here are from a qualitative project among these Jerrahi-Halvetis. They were gathered through participatory observation and semi-structured biographic interviews held among six non-Muslim-born group members in 2004.

The main research question was to discover the quality of the life promised by this Sufi group through the stories of involvement with the group. Thus, the personal profiles of the ones who attached themselves to such belonging were of interest, not least the changes in their everyday practices caused by this belonging. To this end, I asked each interviewee to tell me the story of this group in his or her own life beginning from the point they saw relevant. I was simply curious about the form of Islam in the Western experience of Sufi spirituality, hence focused on the meaning of Sufi experience for the interviewee. Thus, the interviews were held in interactive style. For interpretation I preferred following their wording as much as possible.

Sufi Spirituality: A Preliminary Discussion

Spirituality is rarely imagined out of the scope of religion in Muslim conscience, whether or not this spirituality is within Sufism. However, Sufi spirituality has produced forms of religious life apart from the definitions of Koranic law (Pace 2006: 171). Moreover, Sufism as Islamic mysticism and Sufi Orders as organized forms of such mysticism have always carried aspects belonging to both Shi'ite and Sunni Islam, as is the case of Jerrahi-Halvetis.

---

2 Jerrahi-Halvetis are a well-known Sufi Order having some of its historical roots in the medieval period through Halveti Order, suitably with Gilsenan's (1973: 1) distinction referring to the groups of Muslims who came together in the Sufi Brotherhoods, namely tertul, following one of the great Saints of medieval Islam, as well as others in Ottoman Turkey in 1700s through founder saint Mehmet Nureddin Jerrahi. They are among the few Sufi groups who can attract members from people from Western societies (for an early study, see Atacan 1990).

3 My fieldwork was enabled by a post-doctoral research scholarship granted by the Turkish Academy of Sciences. I especially thank the Jerrahi-Halveti Maestro (whom I call Maestro in the text) and the group members, who shared their privacy with me. I refer to them by pseudonyms derived from my first impression of them.