The relations between religion and globalization are complex from both historical and contemporary perspectives. In particular, religious traditions and religious movements have had a transnational dimension from well before the modern centuries, even though the ways that religions manifest their extraterritoriality today may be quite different when compared with the past. Religious traditions and movements have also had to face the challenge of ‘localizing’ themselves in different places and regions well before the contemporary period. In this chapter, I elaborate on this very general insight through an analysis of the historical emergence of Islam, within that of Sufi Islam, and within that of South Asian Sufi Islam, focusing on the specific case of the Chishti Order. My aim is to show the transnational origins of Sufism, its particularization in specific orders and those orders in specific regions, using primarily the example of the Chishti Order in South Asia. On this basis, I then move to an examination of how the contemporary globalization of Sufism, again with a focus on the Chishti Order, is in some ways repeating the translocal and localizing patterns of the past, and yet also demonstrating historically unique adaptations to respond to the different dynamics of present-day globalization.

Islam and South Asia

South Asia’s geographic landscape is replete with the globalizing influences of a variety of religions. Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam prevail as the dominant religions in many of the countries in South Asia. Almost one third of the world’s Muslim population of 1.2 billion followers lives in South Asia (Gregorian, 2003). The four nations with the largest Muslim populations are Indonesia (194 million), India (150 million), Pakistan (145 million), and Bangladesh (130 million). China also has a population of 39 million Muslims (Vaughn, 2005). Although it is generally assumed that Islam in Asia is peripheral in comparison to the population in the Middle East, Muslims are actually a majority in
Kirgizstan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Turkmenistan in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in South Asia and Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. There are also significant minority populations in Khazakstan, India, Thailand, and the Philippines. Sizable Muslim communities are also found in Sri Lanka, Burma, and Singapore.

The Islamic faith came to South Asia beginning around 664 CE, during the Umayyad Caliphate, when trade routes brought it into Southern Punjab, today part of Pakistan (Morrison, 1997). When trading routes closed overland, a complex maritime trading system emerged, connecting the Middle East, Persia and India with societies in East and Southeast Asia. Several centuries later, Islam spread across the Indian subcontinent. Along with trade and conquest came religion. The Sunni school of Islam spread into East Asia from India and the Middle East throughout the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. Along with the orthodox teachings of Islam, Sufism entered into these countries through Islam’s missionary aspects and easily blended into the existing mystical beliefs, thereby greatly facilitating conversion (Lockard, 1995). By the fourteenth century, Islam had become strongly established in northern Sumatra, and merchants spread the religion of Islam to China through Southeast Asia. The Islamic population of South Asia includes significant immigrations of the Arabs, Turks, Afghans, and the Iranians.

In its beginnings, Islam was first the religion of the peoples in Arabia. With the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE, it spread beyond the Arabian peninsula to conquer most of the areas from North Africa and Spain through to Inner Asia and to the borders of what is currently modern-day China and India. The successors of the Prophet, known as Caliphs, thereby established the Dar al-Islam, the abode of Islam, the territory controlled by Islamic rule.

**The Development of Sufism as a Transnational Religious Movement**

Sufism, known as the Islamic mystical movement, began as an ascetic movement in the seventh century (Esposito, et al., 2002). It started as a personal quest for spiritual enlightenment through the removal of luxury. As the Islamic community became solidified, the Umayyad caliphs centered their dynasty in Damascus and lived an imperial lifestyle.