Naqshbandi Sufism and Reformist Islam

WARREN FUSFELD
University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, U.S.A.

I. Introduction

This paper examines and to some extent questions a seemingly prevalent interpretation of recent Islam in the light of the history of one Islamic Sufi institution as it developed from its founding in the late 18th century. Most discussions of Islam, at least among social scientists (one of whom invokes the name of Ibn Khaldun) presume a recent past of radical discontinuities. In contrast, the Islam I explore has its essence in a sense of continuity. Many writers discuss the recent past in the Islamic world in terms of a vision of Islam which pits reform against tradition. Typical of this view are Clifford Geertz and Ernest Gellner. Both have closely observed modern Islamic societies in their fieldwork as anthropologists. As well, they have produced works which address Islam as a phenomenon stretching beyond the regions they have studied in detail. However diverse their detailed studies of Islamic societies, they have examined the recent history of Islam in terms of a common question. Both have sought to explain, in general terms, how it is that the Muslims of contemporary Islamic societies have become so different from the Muslims we know of who lived in those same regions a few centuries earlier. Both have answered this question in remarkably similar ways, giving us pictures of Islamic societies in which change occurs through the working out of radical dichotomies and discontinuities (Geertz’s “scripturalist reaction” and Gellner’s “swinging” and even “unhinging” pendulum).

Ernest Gellner has offered a model of Islamic society which borrows ideas of cyclical change from the work of Ibn Khaldun and from the speculations of David Hume on great historical shifts between monotheistic and polytheistic religions. Gellner’s model attempts to unify two realms of change in Islamic societies: change which occurs in the political and social structure on the one hand; and change which manifests itself in religious ideology on the other. However accurate the particulars of the discussion may be for Islam in Morocco, they are given a much greater generality. This model divides Islamic society into two polarized segments. On the one hand, literate and scholarly urban Muslims pursue a “scripturalist” or “puritan” style of religiosity, while on
the other, illiterate Muslims of the tribal country-side find their Islam in the tombs and descendants of local saints.\(^2\) Change consists essentially of large scale cyclical shifts up and back between a puritanical, urban vision of Islam and a visionary, "maraboutic" Islam of the tribal countryside. Anything else, according to Gellner, is an exception (that proves the rule?) and should not be thought of as being a true part of "classical" Islamic society.\(^2\)

Geertz has presented a similar model of change in the recent history of Islam. Although he sees more a dialectic process in which a kind of synthesis ultimately will emerge, he nevertheless focuses on the same dichotomies and discontinuities which make up the poles of Gellner's pendulum. Geertz's "scripturalists" are of the same stamp as Gellner's urban ulama and are as radically separated from the rest of their society as Gellner's ulama are from the saints of the countryside. Thus, during colonial rule,

"they (the "scripturalists") gathered strength and, culminating ... in a kind of convulsive self-purification, threatened for a while to drive the classical traditions not merely from the center of the stage but from the scene altogether."\(^3\)

Geertz focuses on the development of a discontinuity in a particular Muslim society, a society in which those who seek an Islamic response to the new conditions of colonialism (Geertz's "scripturalists") find themselves opposed to representatives of the local variant of Islam (i.e., Geertz's "classical" cultural paradigm). Geertz argues the universality of this phenomenon in the sense that when confronted with the challenge of non-Muslim rule in the 19th and 20th centuries, Muslims responded in general by shifting their religiosity to a more abstract and universal interpretation of Islam (based on the Qur'an, Hadith, etc.) and rejecting their local traditions. This was based on the newly prevalent view of those traditions as innovations which degraded the original Islam of Muhammad. It was thus not the fault of Islam that Muslims came to be dominated by non-Muslims, but rather the fault of Muslims who had not properly followed the true Islamic path.

The type of shift which Geertz points to here is, however, but a small element of a more widespread development. The shift toward a more abstract and universally valid interpretation of Islam is a development which occurs not only as a self-consciously reformist movement, but also within the institutions which are part of the mainstream of local Islamic culture. This suggests, and allows for significant change without the rejection of the culture which has thrived in a particular area. The impetus which led reformists to critique local practice and belief has also affected many who continue their identification with the "classical" culture. In fact, for the preponderant portion of Muslims in a given society, the shifts depicted by Geertz are mediated by institutions of the "classical" culture, while the altered religiosity associated with the reformists comes to be internalized by the very institutions which supposedly have been superceded by scripturalist Islam.

In essence, this paper suggests that the most critical figures in bringing about religious change in Islamic societies in the recent past may be precisely