SOME NOTES ON THE NAQSHBANDI TARĪQAT IN BOSNIA

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Study of the contemporary Muslim world concentrates increasingly on the processes of westernisation and modernisation, implicitly regarding these as both salubrious and inevitable, and, indeed, as having already displaced the essential foundations of traditional Islam. There is much in the present state of the Muslim peoples to encourage such a view: the apparently irretrievably shattered unity of the umma, the expanding triumph of secularism in public life, the transformation of religion into ideology by various Muslim movements, and the continued absence of a genuine Islamic renaissance. Elements persist, however, throughout the Muslim world that are at variance with this spectacle of Islam in disarray, and that are commonly overlooked by western observers, including the scholarly among them. Their absence from the picture drawn by scholarly investigation of contemporary Islam derives in part from the unspoken assumption that religion is primarily a function of history and society, so that the interior and vital aspects which in fact constitute its essential and immutable character are ignored or neglected as devoid of interest. The strongholds of traditional Islam are, moreover, in a certain sense inaccessible to the investigator who, for all his learning, is alien to the tradition. It is not a question of rejection, of barriers erected in his path, rather of a certain mode of spirituality, enshrined in tradition, that cannot be appreciated by the common methods of academic

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investigation, but only by participating in its reality, or by the exercise of a rare and subtle type of sympathy.

One such stronghold of traditional Islam is simply the way of life of those Muslims whose existence continues to be formatively guided by Qur’an and sunna, and who thereby preserve the possibility of a real though circumscribed application of the shari‘a. The spiritual contours of their existence are moreover recognisably the same despite differences of language, race and climate; and in this sense one breathes the same air in the mountains of Bosnia and the cities of the Hijaz. This unity, which defies all political fragmentation, receives its most obvious expression in the hajj, when the community of believers is drawn closely together around the Ka‘ba, the pivot to which all are connected throughout the year by the endless series of radii that the canonical prayer creates.

The religious brotherhoods fulfil a similar function of assuring unity in the pursuit and cultivation of tradition, for their branches stretch out and intertwine from one end of the Islamic world to the other and bring the believers together in the shade of that massive tree of esoteric tradition which is the inward essence of Islam. The manner in which the brotherhoods thus continue to be a means for the expression of the ideals and realities of the faith constitutes indeed their real claim to attention in the present age, one that is bypassed by anthropological and sociological investigation. The ṭariqats are above all a stronghold of traditional Islam, and although not impregnable to the assaults of the present age, they have shown themselves capable of permanent resistance and of continuing to provide a framework for the spiritual life of Muslims. It is proposed here to illustrate this statement with an examination of the recent history and present status of the Naqshbandī ṭariqat in Bosnia.

The Naqshbandī ṭariqat first appeared in the Balkans in the fifteenth century in the person of Mollā Abdullāh Īlāhī (d. 896/1490-1491), founder of the West Turkish branch of the order. Born in the town of Simav near Kütahya, he acquired his exoteric learning at the Zeyrek madrasa in Istanbul before embarking on the Sufi path and travelling eastwards to Khorasan and Transoxania in search of a preceptor. After passing through Herat, he arrived