Annabelle Böttcher


The Naqšbandiyya is one of the major Islamic Sufi orders worldwide. Among its sub-branches, it is particularly the Ḥaqqāniyya with its illustrious leader sheikh Nāẓim al-Qubrusī that enjoys visibility in the West.

In the book under review, Annabelle Böttcher aims at a detailed analysis of the Ḥaqqāniyya’s doctrines and structures within the context of broader Naqšbandī traditions. Her approach is based on network theory and the economics of religion. While drawing on network theory to describe the overall social organization of the Ḥaqqāniyya, and especially the basic links between leaders and followers, Böttcher argues that the logic of economics is suitable for explaining why individuals decide to join.

Grounded on the analysis of primary sources, i.e. material from within the network such as books and websites, secondary literature, her own fieldwork encounters, and more than thirty informal conversations with network members, the author outlines the main aspects of the Ḥaqqāniyya’s self-image, religious traditions, ideology, and social organization. After an introduction, her first focus in the main chapter of the book is on religious authority and the ways it is legitimized. Böttcher describes the Ḥaqqāniyya as a pyramidal structure with sheikh Nāẓim at the top. It is for leaders at each stage of the network to provide services and attract followers, for which the author identifies parameters and strategies such as charisma, (orientalizing) aesthetics, monopolistic claims, the construction of a corporate identity, and the ability to supply spirituality, feelings of security, and specific religious experiences. One subchapter (2.2.1.1) focuses in detail on patterns of legitimation from within the religious tradition. Böttcher points to hagiographic elements in the biographical accounts of sheikh Nāẓim and examines the significance of miracles, as well as of biological and spiritual genealogies. She shows how these narratives are strategically constructed as they serve as legitimizing links to the tradition. Two subsequent chapters deal with the hierarchies of saints (2.2.2) and the doctrine of the apocalypse according to the Ḥaqqāniyya (2.2.3).

The author then turns to the network’s structural and social features (chapter 2.3). Pointing out the crucial relevance of the teacher-pupil relationship, Böttcher dwells on the requirements and soteriological functions of the master, whose task it is to lead his followers towards spiritual perfection, meaning, above all, to help them restrain their *nafs* (“Triebseele”, the soul driven by instincts alone). Pupils are supposed to show love, loyalty, and obedience to their
teacher. As the author makes clear, however, in matters of personal life followers feel quite free in their reactions to the sheikh’s advice, obedience at all costs usually being not more than the propagated ideal.

One chapter (2.3.1.2) focuses on the rituals of the Ḥaqqāniyya, i.e. basically common Sufi practices such as ḏikr, soḥbet (ar. suḥba), and enclosure. Böttcher discusses these practices with regard to their capacity to consolidate the pupils’ bonds to their teachers (rābiṭa), strengthen relationships among network members, renew and legitimize hierarchies, and evoke religious feelings. Another chapter (2.3.1.3) deals with the religious involvement of women. The author reflects on the observation that many Western women are attracted to the network, despite its propagation of polygamy and pronounced gender-hierarchies in matters of ritual and domestic life. Böttcher argues that the female contribution to the network’s success is, in fact, pivotal and states a gap between social ideal and reality. In contradiction to the propagated ideology, according to which women should stay at home and care for the children, the wives of sheikhs are often the economic strength behind the activities of their husbands. However, women who do themselves have religious authority and are referred to as “sheikha” are only seen as dependent agents of their husbands and receive their functions from male family members.

In Ḥaqqāniya discourse, women are ascribed a generally lower spiritual stage, as a couple of unequivocal statements by sheikh Nāẓim illustrate. The capability of women to act as autonomous religious leaders is denied.

Concerning the funding of network activities (chapter 2.3.2), Böttcher stresses that members are in no way pressed to donate or pay zakāh to the Ḥaqqāniyya. Rather, the network is described as a reservoir for services and contacts. Services are in fact called in by the sheikhs, which for the author shows how the value of obedience in Sufi doctrine is used to legitimize feudal structures. At the same time, network affiliation economically pays off, as Böttcher convincingly illustrates. Adherents offer business opportunities to one another, as they are possible associates, and they grant special rates to each other. With regard to fund-raising strategies, based on some striking examples it is argued by the author that pragmatics in general outweigh ideology.

In a chapter on political doctrines (2.3.3), Böttcher mentions a broad range from quietism to pragmatic opportunism to sympathy for armed ḥijād within the Naqšbandiyya. Sheikh Nāẓim shows a strictly anti-democratic attitude and favors systems with clear elite-mass dichotomies, strong leaders, and even violent suppression of free speech. Böttcher dwells on his tendency to idealize monarchies: whereas the romanticization of the Ottoman Empire and the disaffirmation of the Turkish Republic is typical for the Ḥaqqāniyya as a whole, sheikh Nāẓim also displays special affection towards Prince Charles, who, he hoped, would become the head of a Muslim sultanate. Meanwhile, in the