

Beyond Whirling and Weeping: Tasawwuf in America

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Sufism (*Tasawwuf*) in the West is often portrayed in the visual media as exotic. The members (*murīds*) of the *Mevlevi Tariqah* in Texas are pictured whirling in meditation as their teacher did centuries before (Naim 2005), dramatic images of men moving to the pulse of *dhikr* (remembrance) show Sufis in Macedonia (Biegman 2007), and smiling men wearing turbans with long white beards often depict the *Naqshibandi Tariqah*. The extraordinary and unusual practices are emphasized by the visual media, resulting in the sense that Sufism is a non-Western tradition at odds with modern rationality. It gives little indication of why Westerners would join a Sufi *tariqah* other than as an escape from normative culture.¹

Sufism is generally described as 'Islamic mysticism' (Schimmel 1975, 3) or the 'heart of Islam' (Haeri 2004, 9). Sufi orders, or *tariqahs*, began forming around the 12th century, prompted by the material excesses of the Umayyad and Abbasid Empires. Sufism derives inspiration from the divine revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muḥammad and is based on the student-teacher model of transmission of inner knowledge to the pious *ahl as-suffa*, 'People of the Bench,' who gathered around the Prophet Muḥammad. Sufism became known to the public as a way to return to submission (*islam*) and receive training in devotions to God. Historically, traveling Sufis played an important role in spreading Islam into non-Muslim lands because of their universal approach and appeal amongst the general public (Arnold 1935; 'Izzati 1978; Levtzion 1979, 17), although Sufis have also been documented as warriors spreading Islam through violence (see Eaton 2008). Over time, 12 main Sufi *tariqahs* and hundreds of smaller branches formed worldwide. The students (*murīds*) involved in a *tariqah* live and study under the guidance of a spiritual teacher (*shaykh*) and strive to purify themselves and remove personal attachments that distance them from constant awareness and love for God. This is done by participating in additional observances beyond the usual rituals of Islam, such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God's 99 attributes).

¹ Sufism is also established in America as a New Age phenomenon, which interprets Sufism as being uncontainable by any formal religion and thus denies the adherence to Islam as important to making genuine progress on the Sufi path. This paper only briefly explores this issue.

While a number of academic studies discuss the reasons behind Westerners joining Sufi movements, the discourse is very limited concerning those who join Sufi *tariqahs* which require conversion to Islam. One reason for this is that conversion to Islam through Sufism is reported as rare (Smith 1999, 69; Hermansen 2000) since Americans are often attracted not to the Islamic religion itself, but by the universal spirituality in Sufism that is common to the New Age Religions.² Regardless, there are a number of internationally-recognized converts to Islam in Americans, including Hamza Yusuf, Aisha Bewley, Umar Faruq Abd Allah, Nuh Keller, and Nurddeen Durkee, for whom Sufism plays a role in their lives as scholars, authors, and leaders in their Islamic communities.

Westerners are often attracted to this spiritual path by creative expressions such as poetry, stories, and dancing (Hermansen 1998; Smith 1999, 69). Sufism provides an outlet for those seeking and spiritual fulfillment (Jawad 2006, 160; Weismann 2007, 167). Köse (1996, 147) found in his study that many who joined Sufism reported feeling dissatisfaction with their former religions and wanting to have meaningful interactions with the Divine. Joining Sufism can also be a way to reject dominant cultural values, since Sufism and Islam have a counter-culture attraction with roots in the 1960 hippie culture (Köse 1996, 194).³ However, Hermansen (2000) notes that most Sufi movements in America are world-accommodating and supportive of Western culture. Another large draw is the allowance for intellectual spiritual discourse (Hermansen 2004) and artistic expressions, such as poetry, dancing, and music (Smith 1999, 69). Western women, in particular, are sometimes attracted to Sufism as an alternative to the restrictive traditions in which they were raised (Smith 1999, 72; Jawad 2006; see Helminski 2003).

Since Americans are often attracted to Sufism by mystical writings, the artistic elements, and the universal spirituality, they more often join Sufi movements which resemble the New Age phenomenon and do not have a strong connection to Islam or requirement to formally convert. This is highlighted in Taylor's (1999, 35) 'inward, outward, and awkward,' categories of religious conversion. He situates conversion to Islam through Sufism in the 'awkward' category which encompasses individuals who are involved in interreligious activities, but shy away from partaking in an official conversion marked by rituals. He does not discuss those who formally convert to Islam through Sufism.

² On the other hand, Dutton (1999:163) declares that Sufism 'is still one of the main points of entry into Islam for Europeans.'

³ Zebiri (2008:52) determined that converts are particularly well positioned to provide critiques of Western society as well as Islamic society because of their 'double marginality.'

Due to the lack of literature on the topic, it also appears uncommon for Muslims who are born in America to join Sufism. While it is unlikely for Muslims to join ‘New Age Sufism’ because of its disassociation from Islam, Islamic-oriented Sufi *tariqahs* are more likely to attract Muslims, particularly those living in a non-Muslim setting who may seek out others who practice inner devotion as well as ritualistic devotion to Islam. Gisela Webb (1994, 76) mentions ‘born Muslims’ participating in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, but it is in reference to immigrants who followed Bawa to America from Sri Lanka, not Muslims in America who became *murīds*. Similarly, Trix (1994, 374) states that all but two ‘inner members’ of the *Bektashi Tariqah* in Detroit were emigrants from the Balkans. The exceptions were individuals born in America, but she does not indicate whether they had converted to Islam or had been raised Muslim. The *Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqah* is more likely to attract Muslims because of its openness to a variety of cultures. However, the acting leader, *Shaykh* Hisham, provoked discord with the Muslims in America in 1999 during a State Department Open Forum when he declared that ‘extremism has been spread to 80% of the Muslims in the US’ (Curtis 1999, cited in Damrel 2006, 120-121).⁴ This public statement hindered relations between Muslims in America and the *Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqah* and led to boycotts of the order by some Muslims, which likely impacted the number of Muslims joining this Sufi order.

The aim of this paper is to deconstruct the Otherness, in regards to mainstream Islam, that often defines Sufism and explore why Americans join Islamic *tariqahs*. This will be done by focusing on the ‘*Alamī Tariqah* in Waterport, New York, which was established by *Shaykh* Asaf of the Balkans. The diversity of religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds manifest in the membership of this *tariqah* alludes to the appeal of Sufism amongst Americans of various walks of life. This *tariqah* is best described by Hermansen’s (2000; 2004) ‘Hybrid’ category in her garden analogy of Sufi movements in America⁵ because it ascribes to an Islamic framework while incorporating aspects of the American context, such as approaching matters from a perspective which is understood by individuals with non-Muslim backgrounds. Fieldwork was conducted with this *tariqah* between July 2009 and January 2010. Seventy-three percent of the *murīds* participated in the research through the survey (35 were returned) and 14 semi-structured interviews.

⁴ This coincides with the U.S. government endorsement of Sufism as ‘good’ Islam.

⁵ The other categories distinguished by Hermansen of Sufi movements in America include ‘Perennials,’ which approach Sufism with a focus on its universality and do not necessarily require adherence to Islam, and ‘Transplants,’ which consist mainly of emigrants who practice Sufism in a similar fashion as they did in their homelands.

The ‘*Alamī Tariqah* in Waterport, NY

Shaykh Asaf emigrated from the Balkans in the late 1960s and established the ‘*Alamī Tariqah* in America. Its main center is in Waterport, New York, on the southern shores of Lake Ontario. *Shaykh Asaf* received his *hilāfetnāmah* (title as leader) from the late *Shaykh Yahya* of the *Khalwātī-Hayātī Tariqah* in Ohrid, Macedonia, and the late *Shaykh Jemali* of the *Rifā’ī Tariqah* in Prizren, Kosovo, which greatly adds to his credibility as a *shaykh* according to Ottomanist James Abiba⁶ (2007, 5). *Shaykh Asaf’s silsila*, or chain of spiritual transmission, is traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad through both *Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad ar-Rifā’ī*, al-Husseini, *Shaykh* of the Age (*Qutub*), founder of the *Rifā’ī Tariqah*, one of the original twelve main orders, and Pir Muhammad Hayati Sultan, founder of the *Khalwātī-Hayātī Tariqah*. Originally, the ‘*Alamī Tariqah* identified with the *Khalwātī-Hayātī Tariqah*. In the mid-1980s, elements of the *Rifā’ī* order were also incorporated, and then, with permission from his superiors, *Shaykh Asaf* initiated it as the ‘*Alamī Tariqah* in the mid-1990s. In Arabic, ‘*Alamī* means: of the ‘world, universe, creation’ (Salmoné 1978). This alteration reflects the focus of the order on issues which impact humankind.

The literature contains limited and sometimes incorrect information on this *tariqah*. Noormuhammad’s (1995, 42) article on Sufism in Toronto and Hermansen’s (2000) overview of Sufis in America both briefly identify *Shaykh Asaf* and his establishment of a *tariqah* in America, and yet they refer to it as the *Rifā’ī Tariqah*. Other sources which refer to *Shaykh Asaf’s* presence in America is Abiva’s online article⁷ on Sufism in the Balkans, although it does not mention the *tariqah* by name, and his unpublished report on *Shaykh Asaf* (2007). The community in Waterport, which was established in 1978, is undocumented in the published literature. Literature originating from *Shaykh Asaf* (2001; 2004) and members of this *tariqah* has not attempted to correct this neglect, and there is no website associated with this *tariqah*.

At the time of this study, there were 52 *murīds* living with their families in or near Waterport, and other *murīds* resided across America, Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, South Africa, and the Balkans. Ninety percent of its *murīds* in Waterport were Americans who converted to Islam.⁸ They were mostly white and black Americans and had Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and ‘seeking’ religious backgrounds.⁹ There were also two emigrants from

⁶ James L. Abiba is also known as Huseyin Abiva.

⁷ See <http://www.alevibektasi.org/xabiva.htm>.

⁸ The other ten percent are emigrants, some of whom were raised Muslim and others who converted.

⁹ W.C. Roof (1999) writes about the religious and spiritual tendencies of Americans born after World War II and notes a culture of religious seeking.

Europe and Scandinavia who embraced Islam later in life and three Muslim emigrants from South Asia living in Waterport. Since only two emigrants participated in this research, their data is included in this study.

Conversion to Islam through Sufism

Literature on religious conversion provides a framework for understanding the process of taking *intisab* (joining a Sufi *tariqah*) and, in this case, converting to Islam through Sufism.¹⁰ According to Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (1999, 23), conversion refers to many different religious changes including ‘changing from one religious tradition to another, changing from one group to another within a tradition... [and] the intensifying of religious beliefs and practices,’ all three of which are important for this study.¹¹ It is a complex, on-going process that takes place in the sociocultural context of individuals’ lives and may involve a single transformational event but is not solely defined by it (Rambo 1993, 5). Elaborating on this process, Rambo (1993) provides a flexible seven stage model of conversion which consists of: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. This study is mainly concerned with the process leading up to and involving the commitment to convert. Lofland and Skonovd (1981) identify six common conversion ‘motif experiences’ including: 1) intellectual, describing those who went in search of knowledge, 2) mystical, those who experienced sudden and indescribable insight, 3) experimental, those who tried out various alternatives, 4) affectional, those who were drawn by a loving and affectionate community or individual, 5) revivalism, those caught up by emotional arousal and group conformity, and 6) coercive, those who were forced to convert. The intellectual, mystical, experimental, and affectional motifs were found to be particularly important for the *murīds* of the ‘*Alamī Tariqah*’.

This study found that the *murīds* took *intisab* most often because of a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God (see Table 1), agreeing with Weismann (2007), Jawad (2006), and Köse’s (1996) findings that Westerners crave spiritual awareness. This also

¹⁰ Despite common reference to ‘converting to Islam,’ there is no direct Arabic translation for ‘conversion’ (Dutton 1999:151). The concept of becoming Muslim is described by the verb *aslama*, meaning literally ‘to submit.’ As discussed in the Qur’an (4:125), a Muslim is someone who ‘submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham, the true in faith.’ Islamic belief states that all souls bowed to God prior to being born (Qur’an 7:172) and thus are born believers, even though this memory does not remain in the consciousness. Therefore, becoming Muslim is sometimes called a ‘reversion’ because the individual is returning to his or her original faith of submission to God (Jawad 2006:155). However, for ease of understanding, I use ‘conversion’ in this paper.

¹¹ Köse (1996:1) specifies another type of conversion, the change from having no religious commitment to living a devout religious life. This was not relevant for those in this study and thus not included.

indicates that they aspire for deeper faith and experiential-based awareness of God. Interestingly, the second highest ranking reason was because of a personal, transformational experience, which is not commonly discussed in the literature as a motivation for conversion, although it corresponds with Schimmel's (1975, 4) declaration: 'A spiritual experience that depends on neither sensual nor rational methods is needed' to give insight to the knowledge of the heart, *gnosis*, and encourage pursuit of the 'Last Reality.' Having an unexplainable, spiritual experience likely impacted the desire to have a relationship with the Divine. The high ranking of intellectual spiritual development, in third place, shows this to be a *tariqah* that respects and encourages the pursuit of knowledge, and this confirms Hermansen's (2004) statement that Caucasians and African Americans tend to join Sufi communities in the pursuit of intellectual spiritual knowledge. Although the role of the *shaykh* is ranked fourth, this is clearly a complex factor that acts on various levels during the decision to take *intisab*. The results also confirm that spiritual healing, ranked in fifth place, is also an important reason for joining a *tariqah*, as Köse (1996) found in his study of British converts to Islam which included several involved in Sufism.

Table 1. Top Five Reasons for Becoming a Murīd in the 'Alamī Tariqah

Rank	Reasons	Total Votes (out of 35)
1	Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God	29
2	Personal, transformational experience	28
3	Intellectual spiritual development	19
4	Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh	18
5	Desire for Spiritual healing	15

The survey participants were asked to indicate their top five reasons for joining the Alami *Tariqah*. These are the results from 35 responses.

Notably, dissatisfaction with societal norms was a very uncommon reason for joining this *tariqah*, only receiving three of the possible 35 votes (9%), two coming from second-generational¹² *murīds* and one from an immigrant convert to Islam. Expanding on their dissatisfaction, one respondent specified the competitive, sexual and business-oriented culture, and another indicated having compared the lives of *Shaykh* Asaf and his *murīds* to others not involved in the *tariqah* and then deciding to aspire to be a Sufi. Otherwise, they do not appear to have been looking for an alternative cultural movement.

¹² Individuals born to *murīds* who then also joined the *tariqah* and became *murīds*

However, dissatisfaction with Western society was indicated by four of the 20 *murīds* (20%) who embraced Islam as one of their top five reasons for doing so, thus showing that it factored differently in the decision to become Muslim compared to taking *intisab*. When asked on the survey whether they would describe themselves as Americans, a majority of 23 *murīds* (66%) agreed that they would, while eight replied that they would not, and four declined to answer. The written explanations showed differing concepts of what it means to identify as an American including place of residence, nationalism, loyalty, patriotism, and agreeing with common values. For example, a respondent who answered affirmatively declared, 'If one doesn't take ownership of the country, then there is nothing gained.' Another remarked positively on the American freedoms, while others expressed dismay with the predominant values and government policies including this response: 'I am a citizen of both US and Canada. If you mean a patriot who unquestioningly follows government policy – no, I am not American.'¹³ These opinions, though, appeared to have little influence on their decision to pursue the Sufi path within Islam.

Further Discussion

A closer look at the *murīds'* experiences sheds light on personal motivations and diverse ways of coming to the *tariqah*. To better understand the conversion process, the research participants were divided into three groups: 1) non-Muslims who joined the *tariqah* and became Muslim during the process, 2) non-Muslims who embraced Islam prior to joining the *tariqah*, and 3) Muslims who joined the *tariqah*, including those born to *murīds* and a small number of immigrants. The three categories contained almost equal numbers of *murīds*. Unfortunately, I was unable to ascertain the religious history of three survey respondents, and thus they were not included in the categories.

I. Individuals who converted to Islam when joining the Tariqah

The first category consists of 12 *murīds* with non-Muslim backgrounds who converted to Islam in connection with joining Sufism. A slightly higher number of men (7) than women (5) came to the *tariqah* in this manner, all indicating European ancestry. They reported being raised with a religious background of either Christianity (8) or Judaism (4), although the

¹³ The U.S. presidency changed from George W. Bush to Barack H. Obama in January of 2009, nearly a year prior to my research, but the implications of Bush's presidency were still widely felt. President Bush was known for declaring 'War on Terrorism,' which involved armed conflicts in Afghanistan (started in 2001) and Iraq (started in 2003), and establishing the Guantanamo Bay detention camp.

influence of it in their lives differed greatly. These individuals went on quests to fill a void that they perceived in their lives, following the ‘experimental’ and ‘intellectual’ conversion motifs of Lofland and Skonovd (1981). During their searches, on a whole, they participated in various Christian denominations, Modern Hasidic Judaism, Zen, Yoga, Quakerism, New Age, Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Pipe Carrier in the Lakota Way (Native American religion), and the esoteric teachings of Gurdjieff. Some of them were looking for a Sufi *shaykh* during their search, while most were unfamiliar with Sufism at the time of their introduction to the *tariqah*. Many had unexplainable, transformational experiences that served to solidify their commitment to *Shaykh* Asaf and this spiritual path. For example, one seeker had a very powerful awakening when he met *Shaykh* Asaf: ‘I left shaking because just being in his presence showed me that I was a complete fool up until that moment.’¹⁴ Although he had been participating in various spiritual paths, meeting *Shaykh* Asaf opened his eyes to a new awareness of what it meant to be a spiritual seeker.

Another example is Fatima,¹⁵ who went looking for a spiritual guide in the mid-1970s to help her progress in her quest for awareness and closeness to God. While Fatima met many teachers whom she recognized as ‘real,’ including a North American Indian shaman and an Indian guru, she recognized that they were not right for her. She began having dreams about meeting a spiritual teacher who took different physical forms, but always had the same, recognizable eyes. After some time in her dreams, she was invited to join ‘the circle’ (*halka*). It was at this point that an acquaintance took her to *Shaykh* Asaf’s new, empty apartment in New York, and she recognized her guide:

We went in there, and there was not a stick of furniture, the whole place was empty. And, he was sitting against the wall... And, I remember... he looked up at me because I was standing up and he was down there, and I just saw his eyes. And, that was it.

Fatima recognized *Shaykh* Asaf immediately as her teacher because his eyes were the same as she had witnessed in her dreams.

When the *murīds* in this category took the *shahada*, many knew very little about formal Islam because of their interest in Sufism as a spiritual path or their dedication to *Shaykh* Asaf, who insisted his *murīds* adhere to Islam. They most often took *intisab* and *shahada* within the same year, making it an intertwined process. See Table 2 below for the most common five

¹⁴ Amir, Interview, Waterport, September 9, 2009. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participant. Since most of the *murīds* have taken Islamic second names, this is reflected in their pseudonyms.

¹⁵ Interview, Waterport, January 14, 2010. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the participant. Since most of the *murīds* have taken Islamic second names, this is reflected in their pseudonyms.

reasons for accepting Islam, the first of which was a personal transformational experience, reported by all but one survey respondent. This makes sense because these individuals needed to be convinced that Sufism/Islam had something profound and substantial to offer before they committed to the *tariqah*. For example, Muhammad¹⁶ explained that he had experimented with a variety of churches, Yoga, Zen, Buddhism, Vegetarianism, and even devotion to his artistic career, but he found it difficult to commit to any for very long. However, 23 years after encountering the Sufis in Waterport, he remained dedicated to this *tariqah*. While some of these *murīds* expressed that over the years they had embraced Islam as their personal faith, others preferred to relate to Sufism in a more universal, spiritual fashion. Regardless, the majority reported praying and fasting as required in Islam.

Table 2. Top Five Reasons for Converting to Islam in association with Joining Sufism

Rank	Reasons	Total Votes (out of nine)
1	Personal transformational experience	8
2	Strong moral values found in Islam	7
3	Similarity of message to previous religious beliefs	5
4 or 5	Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path	4
4 or 5	Simplicity of faith	4

The survey participants who converted to Islam in connection with joining Sufism were asked to indicate their top five reasons for accepting Islam. These are the results from nine respondents.

II. Individuals who converted to Islam prior to joining the Tariqah

The second category of *murīds* includes 11 individuals who were raised non-Muslim, converted to Islam, and took *intisab* later. Their character profiles are notably different from those previously mentioned, being more likely female (8) than male (3), and having mainly African ancestral backgrounds mixed with Native American and European, except one with exclusive European ancestry. These individuals formerly associated with Christianity. The time between taking the *shahada* and *intisab* was typically between five and 20 years, except for one individual who met *Shaykh* Asaf three days after taking the *shahada* and joined the *tariqah* within the same year. These individuals were not searching for an alternative religion to Islam, but were drawn to the *tariqah* most often by mystical, transformational experiences that convinced them of the legitimacy of this path and overcame their initial skepticism of Sufism, which a majority in this category experienced.

¹⁶ Interview, Waterport, September 6, 2009.

Most of the *murīds* in this category either had: 1) a mystical experience, or 2) they thought involvement in the *tariqah* could satisfy something that was unfulfilled in their life circumstances, such as spiritual fulfillment or community support. These coincide with the ‘mystical’ and ‘affectional’ conversion motifs (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). See Table 3 for the most common five reasons for joining the *tariqah*.

Table 3. Top Five Reasons for Joining the ‘Alamī Tariqah among Converts to Islam

Rank	Reasons	Total Votes (out of 11)
1	Personal, transformational experience	10
2	Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God	9
3	Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh	8
4	Intellectual spiritual development	5
5/	Supportive community of faith	4
5	Desire for spiritual healing	4

The survey participants who converted to Islam separately from joining Sufism were asked to indicate their top five reasons for accepting Islam. These are the results from 11 respondents.

As noted by Sophie Gilliat-Ray (1999, 317), there are differences between inter- and intra-religious conversions, notably a lack of an initial crisis and quest. For example, Amirah¹⁷ had been Muslim for 20 years and expressed content with Islam and her involvement in the local Sunni mosque. When her sister-in-law encouraged her to meet *Shaykh* Asaf, she recalled asking, ‘What’s wrong with just being Muslim?’ Another individual, Omar,¹⁸ had read about Sufism but did not connect his book knowledge with what his friends at the local mosque were describing in Waterport. He teased his friends, some of whom were already *murīds* of *Shaykh* Asaf, and gave them difficulty about following the *shaykh’s* advice. However, many of the *murīds* reported having a strong desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God, and transformational experiences opened their eyes to the possibility. For example, when Amirah attended a weekend gathering in Waterport, the talks given by *Shaykh* Asaf touched her deeply:

I remember sitting in this room, and I just burst into tears. It was uncontrollable, I don’t know why. I mean, everything that I had received that weekend was just life-changing. The *muhabbet* [discourse] was just all about Allah, and how Allah loves me, and how Allah looks at me, and how Allah is

¹⁷ Interview, Waterport, September 4, 2009.

¹⁸ Interview, Waterport, September 20, 2009.

forgiving and merciful, and it was all about Allah, and love for Allah, and Allah loving me, and... I just couldn't contain it. And, I just cried uncontrollably, and I'm not a crier like that, and I was sitting there crying... and all of a sudden I just stopped, and I felt like I was released.

After returning home, Amirah continued to feel a change in her life throughout the following week that she described as though a veil was opening, bringing her greater awareness of God's presence. Another *murīd*, Shafiya,¹⁹ also spoke of an unexplainable event that deeply impacted her decision to join the *tariqah*. The second time she met *Shaykh* Asaf, he called her to the front of the gathering, and:

Shaykh Asaf told me about *me* in front of everybody. Things that I ain't never told nobody in my life, but he knew. And in my mind is, who is this man who know things that I ain't never told nobody? Tears started just flowing. They were just flowing. He was the only one who knew that I was tired. And, from that point on, I was hooked.

Experiences such as these facilitated the growth of the *tariqah*. Similar to witnessing miracles (*kiramets*), these experiences served to increase awareness of the presence of God, inspired greater belief, and appealed to those who wanted a deeper relationship with God.

A few *murīds* were searching for something more within Islam when they were introduced to the *tariqah*. For instance, Miriam²⁰ described how Islam in the mosques had become ritualistic, and she was looking for something deeper and more spiritual. She expressed that she became aware that she had experienced a religious transformation that did not fully satisfy her spiritual needs, similar to Ian Dallas' (1972, 74) experience:

I soon began to realize... just going to Juma [Friday prayer service], I had changed my dress, covered my head, changed my name, and went from worshipping God on Sundays to worshipping on Fridays. And, I got very scared because I knew that my *shahada* was real, but there wasn't enough in the larger Muslim community to keep me on that. You know, it went back to the legalistic, which I always rebelled against... in Christianity, of the legalistic view versus the heart view.

In the *shaykh's* example and teachings, which she came across while attending Friday Muslim prayers in a city near Waterport, where *Shaykh* Asaf served as the *imam*, she recognized a possible answer to her dilemma. The *tariqah* provided her a way of following Islam while pursuing an inner desire for deeper awareness of God.

¹⁹ Interview, Waterport, November 14, 2009

²⁰ Interview, Waterport, January 20, 2010.

III. Muslim-born individuals who joined the Tariqah

The third category consists of *murīds* who were born and raised Muslim and took *intisab* later in life. The 12 in this category (8 males, 3 females, 1 undisclosed) include one first-generation immigrant as well as eleven mature children of *murīds*. They reported a variety of ancestral backgrounds. Comparable to the other categories of *murīds*, the two most common reasons for taking *intisab* were: 1) desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God and 2) a personal transformational experience (see Table 4). The desire for intellectual spiritual development and spiritual healing tied for third and fourth places. The fifth most common reason was the charisma/leadership style of the *shaykh*. Two participants in this category, both second-generational *murīds*, indicated that dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms impacted their decision to take *intisab*. None reported that they became a *murīd* because of fulfilling an expectation of family or community, although this was anticipated.

Table 4. Top Five Reasons for Born Muslims to Join the ‘Alamī Tariqah

Rank	Reasons	Total Votes (out of 12)
1	Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God	10
2	Personal, transformational experience	9
3 or 4	Intellectual spiritual development	7
3 or 4	Desire for spiritual healing	7
5	Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh	4

The survey participants who were born and raised Muslim and joining Sufism were asked to indicate their top five reasons for becoming *murīds*. These are the results from 12 respondents.

The *murīds* in this category had very different experiences preceding the decision to take *intisab*, and the motifs associated with their conversions include ‘experimental,’ ‘intellectual,’ ‘mystical,’ and ‘affectional’ (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). These differences are possibly related to the amount of time spent in the Sufi community during their childhood. Those born to *murīds* and raised in Waterport were likely to take *intisab* as a logical next step in their spiritual and religious development. Becoming a *murīd* solidified their commitment to Islam and furthered their relationship with *Shaykh* Asaf. As one survey participant indicated, ‘I was offered [*intisab*], and out of my love for the *shaykh* and awareness of the honor of such an invitation, I accepted it. Only later would I come to appreciate the challenges and rewards of the path.’ Another participant wrote about desiring a greater connection to God and wanting to be ‘tempered into a stronger person’ through the spiritual exercises.

Alternatively, individuals who spent less time in Waterport during their childhood experienced a crisis and quest, experimenting with other forms of Islam before requesting initiation into the '*Alamī Tariqah*. Both the strict requirement of adherence to *Shari'a* Law as well as personal experiences of *gnosis* that indicated authenticity of Sufism as a spiritual path, served to draw them to join this *tariqah*. An example is Isa,²¹ who was introduced to different opinions of Sufism and ideologies of Islam while in college. This launched a personal search, and for several years he studied with Muslims from a variety of backgrounds and ideologies including the Salafis, Tablighi Jamaat centers in California and India, and at *Shaykh* Hamza Yusuf's Zaytuna Institute in California:

I was looking for Islam all this time, and I was trying to find the authentic Islam, right? The Tablighi, their program is very simple... the elders are very strict Hanafi *madhab* [school], Sunni application of Islam. So, very straight and narrow, and for me that was something that I... felt very comfortable with... In the process of studying with them and reading their books, there were always these stories about the Sufis, and one of the big chapters in the books that we would study from were about the virtues of *dhikr*... And, that was the thing that kind of softened me up to see where Tasawwuf, Sufism, fit into the traditional Islam...

Although Isa came to view Sufism as an integral part of living according to Prophet Muhammad's *Sunnah*, he had further questions concerning whether the *tariqah* with *Shaykh* Asaf was the best path for him. It was after acknowledging signs from the unseen that *Shaykh* Asaf was already guiding Isa that he became a *murīd*.

Another experience, indicated by an immigrant who was introduced to the *tariqah* in his early 20s, also shows the importance of adherence to Islam and personal experience. Ahmed²² was initially very strongly opposed to Sufism, but this adversity diminished during a process of realizing the legitimacy of *Shaykh* Asaf through an unexplainable, personal moment with the *shaykh* and a general understanding that this path was no different from how every Muslim should live: 'I am not in this path for *Shaykh* Asaf,' he said. 'I'm in this path because I love the Prophet. That's the reason I'm here.'

²¹ Interview, Waterport, September 8, 2009.

²² Interview, Waterport, September 6, 2009.

Conclusion

Exotic and unusual images of Sufis imply that Sufi movements attract Westerners interested in alternatives to normative society. While dissatisfaction with societal norms factored into the decision to convert to Islam for 20 percent of the research participants, it was reported as an uncommon reason to join the *'Alamī Tariqah* (9 percent). Instead, they were drawn more often by a desire to have a deeper relationship with God and by transformational experiences which likely served as an awakening and indicated legitimacy of this esoteric path. Also important factors were opportunities for intellectual development and the charisma and leadership style of the *shaykh*.

To explore this further, the research participants were divided into three categories based on their common histories. The groupings included: 1) non-Muslims who joined the *tariqah* and became Muslim during the process, 2) non-Muslims who embraced Islam prior to joining the *tariqah*, and 3) Muslims who joined the *tariqah*, including those born to *murīds* and a small number of immigrants. The first category consisted of *murīds* (all of European, Christian or Jewish backgrounds) who were searching for a way to fill a perceived void in their lives, and they had participated in various religious movements before joining this *tariqah*. They indicated that the two most common reasons for converting to Islam through Sufism were because of personal transformational experiences and the strong moral values found in Islam. The second category included *murīds* who had converted to Islam prior to taking joining the *tariqah*. All except for one indicated African ancestry, and all had Christian religious backgrounds. The research found that these individuals were not spiritually seeking, like those in the first category. Instead, they were relatively content with Islam and had been Muslim for up to 20 years. They most often joined the *tariqah* as a result of mystical, transformational experiences which indicated Sufism to be a genuine esoteric path of Islam. The final category of *murīds* consisted of those who were born Muslim. These individuals had varied experiences before joining the *tariqah*. Some, particularly those who had grown up in the Sufi community, considered *intisab* as a logical next step in their spiritual development and relationship with the *shaykh*. Others indicated having questioned the legitimacy of Sufism. For those who experienced doubt, mystical experiences and strictness in adherence to Islam greatly influenced their decision to take *intisab*. Although Islamic Sufism provides an alternative to traditional, organized religions in the West, this research indicates that Westerners become involved in Islamic Sufi *tariqahs* most often because of a desire for a deeper, fulfilling relationship with God, not because of the counter-culture appeal.

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