

Program of the International Conference

Transnational Sufism in Contemporary Societies:  
Reconfiguring Practices, Narratives and Boundaries



Fondazione Giorgio Cini 9-11 November 2017  
Centro di Studi di Civiltà e Spiritualità Comparate

## Thursday, 9 November 2017

09:00 - 09:30 Welcome

**Pasquale Gagliardi**, General Secretary of the Cini Foundation.

**Francesco Piraino**, Responsible for the “Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities”.

**Mark Sedgwick**, Aarhus University and conference co-organiser.

09:30 – 11:00

**Thomas Dähnhardt** Ca’ Foscari University - Italy: “Sufis, yogis and the West: can spiritual power defy the border of modernity?”

**Thomas Joassin** London School of Economics - UK: “Popular Islam, Transnational Sufism and war on terrorism in Algeria”.

11:00 – 11:30 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00

**Francesco Piraino** KU Leuven - Belgium: “Who is the infidel in contemporary Sufism?”

**Justine Howe** Case Western Reserve University - USA: “Honoring the Prophet, Performing American Islam: Mawlid Practices in Contemporary Chicago”

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:30 – 16:00

**Muhammed Haron** University of Botswana - Botswana: “Evaluating and Comparing the Murabitun and Haeriyun: Reflections of Contemporary South African Sufism”

**Andrea Brigaglia** Cape Town University – South Africa: “Narratives of Eurapia: Autobiographies of Conversion to Islam by French Rap Artists”

16:30 – 17:00 Coffee break

17:00 – 18:30

**Maike Neufend** Justus-Liebig University - Germany: “Between Spiritual Colonialism and the Re-appropriation of Islam: Emotional Styles of Popular Sufism in Beirut, Lebanon”

**Besnik Sinani** Free University of Berlin - Germany: “Serving the Predecessors: Teachings and Politics of the Ba ‘Alawi Order”

## Friday, 10 November 2017

09:00 – 10:30

**Zachary Markwith** Graduate Theological Union - USA: “The Politics of the Maryamiyyah Sufi Order: Between Quietism and Collusion”

**Usaama Al-Azami** Markfield Institute of Higher Education - UK: “Sufi Scholars and Arab Politics: Mapping the Transnational Networks and Institutions of Traditional Islam after the Arab Revolutions”

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:00

**Mark Sedgwick** Aarhus University - Denmark: “What happened to Sufi Universalism after 1970?”

**Denis Brylov** Kazan Federal University - Russia: “Transnational Sufi movements in the post-Soviet space: The example of al-Ahbash”

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 17:00 Free Time

17:00 - 18:30

**Shaykh Khaled Bentounes, Sufi Master of the Alawiyya** (France – Algeria), public speech and Q&A

20:00 Conference Dinner

## Saturday, 11 November 2017

09:00 – 10:30

**Simon Stjernholm** University of Copenhagen - Denmark: “Sufi Messages in Swedish Public Service Media”

**Katia Boissevain** CNRS - France: “Mawlid al-Nabi in Post-revolutionary Tunisia. What is the Place for Sufi orders?”

10:30 – 11:00 Coffee break

11:30 – 13:30

**Rory Dickson** University of Winnipeg – Canada, and **Merin Shobhana Xavier** Marshall College – USA: “Disordering and Reordering Sufism: North American Sufi Teachers and the Tariqa Model”

**Éric Geoffroy** Strasbourg University - France: “The Sufi Consciousness Foundation: A Sign of Post-confraternity Sufism?”

13:30 - 14:30 Lunch

15:30 – 19:00 Visit to Venice

## Abstracts

**Thomas Dähnhardt** (Ca' Foscari University - Italy): “Sufis, yogis and the West: can spiritual power defy the border of modernity?”

This paper will deal with the developments that have taken place within a particular branch of the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya in India, which for the past two centuries has been characterised by the participation of fellow Hindu initiates. Lately, this “interreligious” Sufi order has been influenced by the Western cultural environment through a number of European and American disciples who since their initiation have been active in spreading the order’s teachings in the Western world. The chapter will address the delicate balance between the doctrines and teachings perpetuated for generations in what is arguably one of the most orthodox Sunni Sufi orders and its developments in a non-Muslim, i.e. Indian cultural sphere and the contemporary Western environment. It thereby will attempt to provide some answers as to how the cultural and religious specifics that gave rise to the developments of an articulate Sufi tariqa are essential for its perpetuation across generations and how the transcultural dimension of its social and religious shift have influenced the process of adaptation to the conditions of modernity.

**Thomas Joassin** (London School of Economics - UK): “Popular Islam, Transnational Sufism and war on terrorism in Algeria”.

The end of the civil conflict in Algeria and the 1990s marked a return of the Sufi orders within the public sphere. This paper is based on an ethnographic work of twelve months with the Habriyya Sufi communities of Oran. Its focus is on the relations between *zawiya* associations and the Algerian state, and the evolution of these since the “black decade” of the 1990s. Using an identity rhetoric based on the idea of an Algerian popular Islam, the state participates in the mythification of an “ancestral Islam,” with which the world of the confraternities is associated. In a global context characterized by terrorism, the discourse of these elites marks the will of a revival of the Sufi voice in the public debate. It reveals national political rivalries (with Morocco) and regional rivalries (with the Arab powers and the Gulf countries in particular) highlighted by the international character of this process. From “Algerian popular Islam,” instrumentalized by the state, to the promotion of a transnational Sufism, the chapter shows how the geopolitical context connects the interests of power with those of the Sufi circles around the fight against Wahhabism.

**Francesco Piraino** (KU Leuven - Belgium): “Who is the infidel in contemporary Sufism?”

This paper will describe the theological narratives of the ‘Alawiyya Sufi order, led by Shaykh Khaled Bentounes. This order is characterized by an “inclusive universalism,” according to which no one holds the truth, and everyone holds only fragments of it. Another characteristic of this Sufi theology is the conception of the infidel, who becomes a state of the soul rather than another human being. Another common narrative is the use of “negative theology as an antidote to nihilism,” and also as an antidote to the ineluctable calcification of the Islamic religion. These theological peculiarities do not affect Islamic practice, but nevertheless deeply affect Sufi structures and social activities. These involve a commitment to interreligious and intra-religious dialogue, ecology and women's rights.

**Justine Howe** (Case Western Reserve University - USA): “Honoring the Prophet, Performing American Islam: Mawlid Practices in Contemporary Chicago”

This paper explores the revival of Mawlid performance in contemporary Chicago. Previously a ritual performed primarily in domestic spaces, Mawlids are now commonplace public rituals in the Chicago area, performed in hotels, conference facilities, universities, mosques, and community centers. The chapter situates Chicago’s Mawlid’s revival in broader intellectual currents in American Islam, namely the influence of scholars such as Hamza Yusuf and Umar Faruq Abd-Allah. These scholars (among others) have promoted dhikr and Mawlid practices and other forms of “Sufi” piety as authentic expressions of Muslim piety, but largely eschew the category of “Sufism” in their lectures and writings (despite their personal participation in formal Sufi networks). Moreover, these representational politics are inseparable from gendered debates over authority. The majority of Mawlid organizers are women, who see in public Mawlid performance the opportunity to cultivate female leadership and ritual authority outside of the mosque.

**Muhammed Haron** (University of Botswana - Botswana): “Evaluating and Comparing the Murabitun and Haeriyun: Reflections of Contemporary South African Sufism”

South Africa’s Muslim community, like many other Muslim majority and minority communities, is heterogeneous in its make-up. One of the main identity markers of this community is Sufism. Since its gradual evolution over the centuries (circa 1700-2010), many of its members have been adherents of well-known Sufi orders that extended their tentacles deep into South African soil. Some of the local Shaykhs, whose influence in the country was extensive, were to some extent challenged by the presence of internationally respected Shaykhs; those who consciously chose to stay in South Africa. One was Shaykh Abdul Qadir as-Sufi who opted to live in Cape Town where he and his followers, namely the Murabitun, established the Jami’a Masjid; and another was Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri and his followers, the Haeriyun, who settled in Mpumalanga’s White River farming area.

**Andrea Brigaglia** (Cape Town University – South Africa): “Narratives of Eurapia: Autobiographies of Conversion to Islam by French Rap Artists”

Over the last few decades, France has become the most dynamic arena of European rap. As in the US, and perhaps even more, the musical careers of many French rappers have overlapped with their Islamic religious engagement. A number of social factors have contributed to create a favourable arena for the development of a dynamic hip-hop culture in France and for its positive encounter with Islam. This paper looks at the autobiographical narratives produced by three rappers who converted to Islam in the French ghettos: the Franco-Antillan Kery James, the Franco-Congolese Abd Al Malik and the Franco-Greek Diam. Sufism plays a strong role in these narratives, especially those of Kery James (who is affiliated to the Ahbash movement) and Abd Al Malik (who is affiliated to the Budshishi order). Looking at these as narratives of journeys of the self, the chapter highlights how the search for self-knowledge, ethical universalism and transcendence—rather than a refuge in a particularistic communal identity—constitute the central themes of these narratives.

**Maike Neufend** (Justus-Liebig University - Germany): “Between Spiritual Colonialism and the Re-appropriation of Islam: Emotional Styles of Popular Sufism in Beirut, Lebanon”

In Lebanon, the tendency to appropriate Sufism as non-Muslim or non-religious heritage emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. During the 1960s, Sufism was adopted by secular Arab poets as they became increasingly disillusioned with the revolutionary regimes they had fought for. This chapter addresses how the transgression of boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim realms is still a basis for the appeal of

transnational Sufism, while primarily affecting those of a higher socio-economic status. By discussing the ways Sufi subjectivities are produced by individualized and deterritorialized practices, my aim is to evaluate how the attractiveness of transnational Sufism in contemporary Beirut relates to the aestheticization of popular religion in a system organized along sectarian boundaries.

**Besnik Sinani** (Free University of Berlin – Germany) *Serving the Predecessors: Teachings and Politics of the Ba ‘Alawi Order.*

This paper examines the teaching, activity, and networks of the Ba ‘Alawi Sufi order. Given the ample documentation of the order’s presence in Yemen, from where it originates, as well as its historical presence in Southeast Asia and East Africa, it focuses mostly on its activity in the Gulf countries and the wider Middle East, as well as the Western world, areas less covered in the scholarly literature, and yet where the order has a dynamic presence. It looks into how the teaching of the order on the *path of the predecessors* translates into missionary activity, creation of networks, and institutions. This paper identifies some of the most influential scholars of the Ba ‘Alawi order in the contemporary world, and while some of them have already attracted scholarly attention, other are less known, despite their influence and scholarship. It seeks, in addition, to highlight notions of authority in the teaching of the order, and how it relates to its positionality in the current sectarian and political debates in the Muslim world. It reflects both research based on texts written by contemporary Ba ‘Alawi scholars, as well as participant observation of teaching and preaching activities of various Ba ‘Alawi leaders for over a year in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. It concludes by attempting to highlight how the study of the Ba ‘Alawi order speaks to a wider theoretical conversation on the study of Sufism in the contemporary world, and by suggesting areas of research that need further investigation, especially given the transnational nature of the order and its implications on the transportation of the Ba ‘Alawi teachings to diverse audiences and localities.

**Zachary Markwith** (Graduate Theological Union - USA): “The Politics of the Maryamiyyah Sufi Order: Between Quietism and Collusion”

Under the charismatic leadership of Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), the Maryamiyyah Sufi order developed out of the background of western occultism, the anti-modernist theories of René Guénon (d. 1951), and the teachings of the Algerian Sufi shaykh, Ahmad al-‘Alawi (d. 1934). Initially centered in Lausanne, Switzerland, Schuon moved his base of operations to Bloomington, Indiana in 1981, where the order shifted from an Islamic-oriented *tariqa* to a syncretist movement that combined Native American, Hindu, and Sufi elements. Guénon’s pro-monarchist and anti-democratic views influenced Schuon and the theories and practical administration of the Maryamiyyah as a religious organization. However, in contrast with Guénon’s political quietism and the apparent ideals of the order, the Maryamiyyah has played an active or advisory role in conservative political establishments in Muslim-majority nations, Europe, and North America. This chapter examines the Maryamiyyah order’s relation to state power through the influence some of Schuon’s successors and followers. The chapter argues that the political strategies and alliances of the Maryamiyyah have more in common with those of Muslim court scholars or Julius Evola (d. 1974) than Ahmad al-‘Alawi or René Guénon.

**Usaama Al-Azami** (Markfield Institute of Higher Education - UK): “Sufi Scholars and Arab Politics: Mapping the Transnational Networks and Institutions of Traditional Islam after the Arab Revolutions”

In the modern Middle East, a number of individuals and the institutions they are affiliated with may be viewed as exponents of “Traditional Islam,” which Kasper Mathiesen characterizes as an Islamic denomination. In the Arab world, this denomination is in competition with two other major trends:

Wahhabism (often referred to as Salafism), and Islamism (often referred to as political Islam). In this context, Traditional Islam can be viewed as the standard-bearer of Sufism in the region. In the wake of the Arab revolutions, the proponents of Traditional Islam in the Middle East have been drawn into political battles in a way that has reconfigured their relationships with both state power and their ideological competitors, most notably democratic Islamists. This chapter maps the networks of individuals and institutions associated with Traditional Islam that have emerged as politically significant in the wake of the Arab revolutions, and tries to understand both the motivations for, and the implications of, such a move for the identity of Traditional Islam.

**Mark Sedgwick** (Aarhus University - Denmark): “What happened to Sufi Universalism after 1970?”

At its origins a century ago, Western Sufism was “Universalist,” understanding Sufism not in terms of Islam but as the essence of all religions. Inayat Khan, the founder of the so-called “Sufi Order,” also established the Church of All. Today, almost all Sufi organizations in the West identify Sufism primarily with Islam, and Inayat Khan’s grandson, Zia Inayat-Khan, has changed the title of his organization from “the Sufi Order International” to “the Inayati Order,” in this respect following standard Islamic practice. Only a few Sufi groups in the West now maintain the Universalism of a century ago, and those that do have often toned down the Sufi element in their identity. The paper traces the shift in Western Sufism from Universalist to more Islamic narratives and identities, explaining this on the one hand in terms of the increased public knowledge of Islam that has accompanied the growth of Muslim minorities in North-Western Europe and the United States, and on other hand in terms of the increasingly controversial status of Islam in the West since the Iranian Revolution, the Rushdie Affair, and 9/11.

**Denis Brylov** (Kazan Federal University - Russia): “Transnational Sufi movements in the post-Soviet space: the example of al-Ahbash”

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the role of religion in post-Soviet societies has increased significantly. The process of religious “revival” also began in Ukraine. This paper will show how the legitimation of al-Ahbash in the post-Soviet space occurred. The al-Ahbash movement endorse a rigid theological orthodoxy, using the concept of “minimal necessary knowledge about Islam.” The chapter, based on audio and video materials from the internet, on articles and interviews with key speakers from the Islamic community in Ukraine shows how the al-Ahbash movement managed to become the legitimate representatives of the entire Muslim community of Ukraine for the government. This strengthened their position in confrontation with their ideological opponents (Salafists and supporters of the Muslim Brothers), and became possible largely due to the Sufi networks that existed in the Soviet era

**Simon Stjernholm**, (University of Copenhagen - Denmark): “Sufi Messages in Swedish Public Service Media”

There are multiple examples of how Sufism has been promoted as a “good,” “moderate” and “tolerant” version of Islam in contrast and opposition to “intolerant” and “radical” articulations. This paper contributes to the study of state-sanctioned representations of Islam by investigating how Sufi-oriented messages are included in a highly unconventional arena for Muslim oratory: religious morning services regularly broadcast on Swedish public-service radio. The chapter analyses religious morning services delivered by Muslims broadcast during 2013 and 2014, with particular attention to how Sufi ideas, concepts, and authoritative figures are incorporated into the speakers’ messages. Representing Islam through references to “Sufi-oriented” ideas, concepts and figures, the speakers on the one hand offer personal interpretations of Islamic tradition, while on the other hand intervening in public debates on Islam and Muslims. They participate in

hegemonic discourses on “good” and “bad” Islam, thus legitimizing the status quo, while also using the public space offered to them in order to achieve noticeable change through expressing highly personal understandings of Islam—often articulated in an implicitly Sufi-oriented framework.

**Katia Boissevain**, (CNRS - France): “Mawlid al-Nabi in Post-revolutionary Tunisia. What is the Place for Sufi orders?”

In Tunis, the Mawlid al-Nabi is celebrated at nightfall at the Kairouan mosque in the presence of the President of the Republic of Tunisia, and the following morning at the Zaytuna mosque with other dignitaries of the government. Another important place for the Mawlid celebrations is Sidi Bou Saïd’s tombs, which were subject to arson attacks in January 2013, where Shadiliyya Sufi disciples recite and chant a poem, the Hamziyya. This paper allows us to reflect on the links between the concrete organization of these celebrations, their religious and emotional backgrounds, and the contemporary political context. The analysis of the Mawlid in Tunis also raises the question of the place of Sufi orders in Tunisia today in relation to power, and the reconfigurations of Sufism, especially among urban youth, in its religious dimension and also its artistic, patrimonial and emotional dimensions. It will also highlight the appeal of a Moroccan religious and aesthetic model for this ritual and question the presuppositions and consequences of this attraction.

**Rory Dickson** (University of Winnipeg – Canada) and **Merin Shobhana Xavier** (Marshall College – USA): “Disordering and Reordering Sufism: North American Sufi Teachers and the Tariqa Model”

Some of the first expressions of Sufism in North America represented a marked move away from the model of Sufi teaching and practice found within the classical Sufi order (tariqa), what can be called a ‘disordering’ of Sufism. Developed along the lines of the medieval guild, the order or brotherhood model came to be associated with Sufism as such. Disordered Sufism represented a response by Sufi teachers to the particular social, historical conditions that framed their teaching of Sufism in the West in the early twentieth century. This paper highlights illustrative case studies of this disordering/reordering process, before considering the social conditions that explain this shift, in particular taking in account different aspects: 1) dynamics of the ‘religious marketplace’ so characteristic of religiosity in North America; 2) recent patterns of Muslim immigration; 3) the emergence of the discourse of Islamic authenticity globally; and 4) the Traditionalist movement.

**Éric Geoffroy** (Strasbourg University): “The Sufi Consciousness Foundation: A Sign of Post-confraternity Sufism?”

This paper describes the “International Foundation Sufi Consciousness,” created in September 2016 in France. This foundation fits well the category of “post-confraternity-ism,” which describes a tendency among different contemporary Sufi orders in which the central role of Sufi order structures is challenged. This is also due to the fact that many recent deceased Sufi masters have no successors, or successors who are less charismatic. Moreover, in transnational Sufism relations between disciple, master, and the other companions are less strong. In fact, the narrow, personalized relationship between master and disciple no longer exists and disappears in favor of more diffuse initiatory energies. Sufi circles have thus rediscovered the fluid, informal initiatory essence characteristic of the early age of *tasawwuf*, before the appearance of the confraternities in the twelfth century.