

**The Sufi and the People:
The Levantine Sufis and Religious Practices of the 18th Century**

The body of literature on the history of religion in the Middle East is vast. Some of the old historiography approaches the study of Middle Eastern religious practices with notions of an Islamic orthodoxy – a notable example of such writings is the classic work of Gibb and Bowen, *Islamic Society and the West*. Such studies seem to have assumed that religion in the Middle East may be explored only through the normative written texts which establish permissible sets of practices pertaining to one's religion. Newer works, on the other hand, do not fail to acknowledge some more informal religious practices present within the Middle Eastern states. However, this scholarship also tends to distinctly separate such informal practices from the normative religious standard, as in Bruce Master's *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire*.

The intention of my proposed research is to reexamine the significance of Islamic mystics – the Sufis – for the development of religious practices within the eighteenth-century Bilād al-Shām (Levant), arguing that the study of religious practices within a specific geographical region has to acknowledge that religion described in normative texts stands inseparable from the vast corpus of informal religious practices present among the inhabitants. My study seeks to examine religious practices which were present in the eighteenth-century Levant by offering a new approach – I will observe religion as a phenomenon informed both by informal religious tradition, and normative religious texts. Whether investigating ritual practices performed during specific religious events, or daily practices that might have had religious appellations or justifications attached to them at particular moments, I would refer to practices that were widespread and actively observed by all levels of the Levantine society, regardless of rank, social standing, or occupation. Focus will be placed on the dynamic relationships in which the Sufi orders, popular Sufis and saints stood with the rest of the population during the specified period. The purpose of my research is to investigate the significance of these relationships for maintaining, shaping, developing, and forming of religious practices within the suggested temporal and spatial framework. In addition, it is my intention to examine how these relationships influenced the Sufis themselves and their orders. Finally, I believe it is worthwhile to examine the importance of categories such as origin, occupation, gender, and social status for one's corpus of exercised religious practices.

This study will bring a comparative perspective as well. Owing to the vast popularity and significance of Sufism for the spread of Islam in the Ottoman Balkans, it will be worthwhile to examine and compare these two regions. In addition, a comparative study of religious practices in different Levantine cities, such as Homs, Damascus, or Aleppo would help uncover not only the rich religious tradition of the Levantine region, but also local peculiarities, their meanings and implications.

Many studies about Sufism in general have already been published and need to be revisited. Such is the case, for instance, with Trimingham's classic *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, or Chih and Mayeur-Jaouen's *Le soufisme à l'époque ottoman*. Some periodicals are actively engaged in the study of Sufism and Sufi practices – for instance, the *Journal of the History of Sufism* (*Journal d'Historie du Soufisme*) or the *Journal of Sufi Studies*. More specific works, like Sirriyeh's *Sufi Visionary of Ottoman Damascus*, O'Fahey's work on Ibn Idrīs, or Reichmuth's work on al-Zabīdī shed light on the practices current in the eighteenth century,

while other studies connect the period of my interest with later history (such as Bruinessen and Howell's *Sufism and the "Modern" in Islam*). Raymond's works provide material to contextualize the Sufis within Arab cities, while the analysis of the historical framework for my proposed study might begin with works such as Grehan's *Everyday Life & Consumer Culture*, Marcus' *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity*, Meriwether's *The Kin Who Count*, or Semerdjian's *Off the Straight Path*. These historiographical works, however, do not use the same approach to religion in the specified geographical region, leaving space for further study. For the Ottoman Balkans, the works of Abiva, Marie Hazen, Tanasković, or Božović represent a good starting point.

Regarding the sources, I intend to use published and unpublished books and manuscripts along with the biographical material produced in the eighteenth-century Levant. I will carry out the analysis of these sources in a comparative framework. Works written by popular Sufis are invaluable for my proposed study. For contextualization, I will rely on the 'ulamā' and non-'ulamā' works of the eighteenth century.

Fortunately, many eighteenth-century Sufi works still exist. A large body of manuscripts, for example, remains behind the most prominent intellectual icon, Sufi scholar, and saint of the eighteenth century Levant – 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Nabulsī. In addition to the relevant material which deals with religious topics – such as *Idāh al-Maqṣūd min Waḥdat al-Wujūd* [*The Clarification of the Unity of Being*] – Shaykh al-Nabulsī left written works about both the ways in which he perceived his position and the desired conduct of a Sufi in the eighteenth-century Levant. Examples of such works are *Wasā'il al-Taḥqīq wa Rasā'il al-Tawfīq* [*The Means of Truth-Seeking and the Letters of Providential Guidance*], or *Jama' al-Asrār wa Man'a al-Ashrār 'an al-Ta'an fī al-Ṣufiyya al-Akhyār* [*A Collection of Secrets and Prevention of Evils that Challenge the Good Sufis*]. Significant material can be observed in writings of other shaykhs, like Muṣṭafā Ibn Kamāl al-Dīn al-Bakrī (with his *Bulghat al-Murīd wa-Mushatahā Muwaffaq al-Sa'īd*) and his son, Muḥammad Kamāl al-Dīn (who wrote a commentary on his father's work entitled *Al-Jawhar al-Farīd fī Ḥall Bulghat al-Murīd*). Analyzing the written works of these shaykhs might help explain the dynamics of religious traditions within the region, as well as influence both practiced by the Sufis and that which they received from the population. Regarding the Ottoman Balkans, the work of Abd al-Rahman Sirri Dede holds great significance.

The 'ulamā' works of the eighteenth century will help contextualize these Sufi writings. Chronicles produced during the period, such as Ibn Kannan's *al-Ḥawāḍith al-Yawmiyya* [*Daily Events*] will further illuminate the historical context for the proposed research. Furthermore, the works of jurists, such as Muḥammad Amīn Ibn Abīdīn, who paid significant attention to social practices and wrote the famous *Radd al-Muḥtār 'alā al-Durr al-Mukhtār* [*The Answer to the Baffled over an Exquisite Pearl*], will serve to uncover the dynamics of the relationship in which the Sufis stood with the rest of the eighteenth-century Levantines. Fatwas issued by the 'ulamā' with regards to daily religious practices need to be examined and compared with the fatwas issued by the Sufis themselves (such as those written by al-Nabulsī, for instance). Such comparison might yield interesting information about the relationships in which various Sufi orders stood with the 'ulamā'. The eighteenth-century Ottoman Balkans hosted their own chroniclers. Of note is Mula Mustafa Ševki Bašeskija with his chronicle on Ottoman Sarajevo which covers the second half of the eighteenth century.

It is also important not to disregard the non-'ulamā' chronicles produced in the eighteenth-century Levant. The Ottoman Empire witnessed the emergence of a large number of these chroniclers during the period covered by my proposed research. Several such authors were active in Bilād al-Shām - a barber, a Shi'ī farmer from Jabal 'Amil and his son, a Samaritan from Nablus, a clerk from Homs, a Damascene soldier and a janissary, and an inquiry into the occupation, social standing, and origin of each of these chroniclers could

convey invaluable examples of the relationship between different parts of society and the Sufis, as well of their attitudes toward each other. For instance, a comparison between the texts of a Damascene barber, Ibn Budayr, and a court official from Homs, al-Makkī, might demonstrate particular ways in which different occupations and societal strata perceived their relationship with the Sufis and the significance of Sufi orders. The chronicle of Mikha'īl Burayk, an Orthodox priest, might on the other hand shed light on the Christian attitudes toward such relationships. Although many of these chroniclers attempted (and to various degrees succeeded) to imitate the *'ulamā'* writing style, the themes and foci of their chronicles sometimes display peculiarities which might come as unexpected for a formal work of this genre. The work of these chroniclers contains a significant amount of information about the religious practices of the Levantine population, Sufi teachings and folklore.

In addition to these sources, compilations of biographies, such as Muḥammad Khalīl al-Murādī's *Silk al-Durar fī A'yan al-Qarn al-Thānī 'Ashar [The String of Pearls Among the Notables of the Twelfth/Eighteenth Century]* might be used to better illustrate the origin and social standing of popular figures who were active in the eighteenth-century Levant. Muḥammad Sa'īd al-Qāsimī's dictionary of occupations, *Qāmūs al-Ṣina'āt al-Shāmiyya [The Dictionary of Damascene Occupations]* is also invaluable for the purpose of my study.

My proposed research aims to provide answers to the following questions: What place did the Sufi orders occupy within the eighteenth-century Levantine society? What are the properties of the interaction and relationship between the Sufis and the Levantines (both the *'ulamā'*, and others)? How did this relationship influence the Sufis and their writings? How did occupation, origin, and the choice of Sufi order influence the work of the Sufis, and the attitudes of the population toward them? How significant were these parameters for the development of religious practices within the population? In what measure did the population influence the Sufis and their ideas about popular religious practices? Did this dynamic interaction spur the emergence of novelties within the corpus of the Levantines' religious tradition of the eighteenth century, and what context lies behind these novelties? Were there particular traditions which were disregarded during the passage of the eighteenth century and why? What was the Sufi involvement in such changes?

The results obtained through my proposed research might advance one's awareness of the social dynamics within which the Sufi orders operated, further illuminate the vast and rich corpus of the Levantine practiced religion, and uncover useful information about the state of affairs in the region during the eighteenth century. In addition, a better awareness of religious traditions present in the eighteenth-century Levant might allow researchers to further assess claims for another narrative of the early modern period in the Arab Muslim world and for resources of an autochthonous development towards the Arab Muslim reform during the eighteenth century (works such as Haykel's *Revival and Reform in Islam*, Massad's *Desiring Arabs*, or Shulze's "Mass Culture and Islamic Cultural Production" stand as examples of such claims). Such research of religious practices might, hence, significantly broaden the views of a researcher interested in Ottoman history and the history of religion in the proposed period. Furthermore, I hope that the approach to religious practices as a phenomenon which emerges both from the informal popular tradition and the normative texts will help form another angle through which religions in the Middle East could be studied.