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CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC SUFISM IN AMERICA: THE PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICES OF THE ALAMI TARIQA IN WATERPORT, NEW YORK

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2011

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Declaration for PhD Thesis

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ABSTRACT

Despite predictions of widespread secularism, Sufism is establishing itself as an alternative religion in Western societies. This study explores how Islamic Sufism is implemented in contemporary America by focusing on the philosophy and practices of the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, New York. Started in the 1970s by a shaykh from the Balkans, this tariqa community is unique due to its large number of American-born members (murids), its ethnically-diverse membership, and its adherence to Islam. This study hopes to increase understanding of what it means to pursue a religious lifestyle as a Muslim Sufi in America. It also intends to expand the literature on Sufism in America and provide detailed analysis of this particular Sufi community.

This study uses an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from the social sciences and religious studies. Fieldwork was conducted in Waterport from July 2009 to August 2010. The research methods included surveys, 14 semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, which were enhanced by the researcher’s insider status as a member of the Alami Tariqa.

The analysis situates this tariqa among the Sufi movements in America and describes how it became established in Waterport. It explores how Islamic Sufi movements have adapted to the pluralistic, Western setting by observing the Alami Tariqa’s approach to upholding sha’i’a while providing opportunities for spiritual growth to both men and women of any ethnic background. This study aims to increase understanding of why Americans join Sufi movements by analysing the conversion narratives and survey responses of current murids. Additionally, it inquires into the pursuit of spiritual goals in a modern environment by presenting several common ascetic practices performed by the Alami Tariqa. Although this tariqa is relatively small, it has the potential to increase awareness of how Islamic Sufism is practiced in modern America.
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GLOSSARY

In an attempt to be consistent with the terminology used among the Alami Tariqa, this study contains transliterated Arabic words in addition to American vernacular forms of Turkish and Bosnian versions of Arabic and Persian words. They have been italicised and transliterated, except when capitalised. The English form of the plural is used in preference to the foreign plural, for example *tariqas* rather than *türuq*.

`abāya  robe-like cloak
adab       correct Islamic behaviour
Ahlel Bayt  family of the Prophet Muhammad
`alamī     of the world, universe, creation
`alayhi salām peace be with him, a salutation added following the name of a prophet
aqṭab      reference points for the time, leaders of saintly hierarchy; plural of ṣuṭub, literally: pole, axis
`arīf       spiritual level of having perfect knowledge, female: `arifa
aṣḥāb aṣ-ṣufla companions of the bench, those who gathered in the Medina mosque and reportedly studied esoteric knowledge with the Prophet Muhammad
`āshūrā` a vegetarian dish of various grains eaten in remembrance of Ashura, also called Noah’s meal in reference to the final meal on the ark
aslama     the concept of becoming Muslim, literally: to submit
bātin      internal, hidden
baraka     blessings
bay`ah      an oath of allegiance to a shaykh, initiates an individual as a murīd
bid`a       innovation
chille      seclusion of 1,000 days practiced among the Khalwati dervishes
da`wah      Islamic missionary activity
dervish     member of a Sufi order
dhikr       remembrance of God
du`ā`        supplication
dunyā the temporal world as opposed to the spiritual world
fajr prayer before sunrise
fanā’ spiritual self-annihilation and merging with God
farḍ religious duty
fātiḥa the opening verses of the Qur’an
fiqh Islamic jurisprudence
fitna conflict
ḥadīth an account, report, or speech concerning the words or deeds of the Prophet Muhammad, his tradition
ḥadīth qudsī verified, strong tradition of the Prophet Muhammad
ḥaḍra gathering, conference
ḥāfiz person who has memorised the Qur’an
haqq truth
haidar vest with no buttons and open in the front, worn in memory of Ali
ḥājj pilgrimage to Mecca, one of the Five Pillars of Islam
ḥājjī person who has performed the ḥajj
ḥāl spiritual state
ḥalāl permitted
ḥalqa circle, *dhikr* circle
ḥaqiqā truth, spiritual reality
ḥarām forbidden
ḥijāb screen, separation, head scarf that is worn by some Muslim women
hijra migration
ḥikma wisdom
hilafetnāmeh certificate of the authenticity of a shaykh
hizmet service
iḥrām clothing worn during ḥajj
iḥsān excellence and perfect virtue, acting with awareness of God
ilahi hymn in praise of God
imām leader
imambargah buildings dedicated to Imam Hussein, also called husayniyyahs
īmān inner faith
intisāb ceremony of giving allegiance to a shaykh and joining a ṣarīqa
irshād spiritual lesson orchestrated, in part, by a shaykh
islām submission and surrender to God’s will
i’tikāf last 10 days of Ramadan
jamā‘a community
janāza funeral prayer
jihād righteous struggle
jihād al-nafs struggle against the inner lower-base self
jum`a congregation, Friday prayer service
Ka`ba cube, a cube-shaped building at the centre of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, orienting point for Islamic prayer
kāfir unbeliever
kashf spiritual unveiling
kātīb recorder of the events, keeper of the chronicles
khalīfa representative
khalwat seclusion, retreat
khānaqāh Sufi lodge
khāṭīb preacher
khutba sermon
kiramet miracle
kiyam standing in prayer
kūfī head covering worn by some Muslim men
madhhab Islamic school of jurisprudence
medressa religious school
majālis al-ta`ziya  Ashura memorial services involving eulogies and retellings of the battle
maktoob  destiny, predetermination
maqām  place, spiritual station
ma`rifa  gnosis, higher knowledge
mawākip al-ḥusayniyya  public mourning processions during commemorations of Ashura, also called al-ʿazı'yya
mawlid  celebration of the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday
mazār  tomb, grave
mihrab  niche which indicates the direction of Mecca
muazzin  announcer of the prayers
muhabbet  discussion, room where discussions take place
muḥāġir  immigrant, person from a foreign land
Muḥarram  first month in the Muslim calendar
muḥāsaba  self-examination
mujāhidin  freedom fighters
murāqaba  meditation
murīd  student of a shaykh, literally: one who is willing
nafs  lower-base self, ego
naqīb  guardian of the gates
pir  founding shaykh of a Šufi order or branch
purdah  curtain, head-to-toe covering worn by some Muslim women
qurbān  unblemished sheep offered in sacrifice
rūḥ  soul
ṣadaqa  charity
ṣafā’  purity
samā’  inspired gathering involving listening to dhikr and sometimes music, dancing, or singing
shabīḥ  re-enactment of the battle of Karbala
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>shahāda</td>
<td>Muslim declaration of faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>shahīd</td>
<td>martyr, literally: witness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shalwar qameez</td>
<td>dress worn by both men and women in South Asia and Central Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharī‘a</td>
<td>sacred law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shauq</td>
<td>yearning</td>
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<tr>
<td>shaykh</td>
<td>Sufi teacher, high spiritual station, also called <em>murshid</em> or <em>pīr</em>, female: <em>shaykha</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shaykh-zade</td>
<td>son of a <em>shaykh</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>silsila</td>
<td>spiritual lineage of a <em>shaykh</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sīra</td>
<td>biography of the Prophet Muhammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>şūf</td>
<td>wool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>suhūr</td>
<td>meal of sustenance before sunrise on a day of fasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sunna</td>
<td>tradition of Prophet Muhammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tafsīr</td>
<td>discussion, interpretation of the sacred texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tajwīd</td>
<td>Qur’anic recitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tarāwīh</td>
<td>additional long evening prayers during Ramadan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭarīqa</td>
<td>way, Sufi order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>taşawwuf</td>
<td>Sufism, inner teachings of Islam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tasdiknameh</td>
<td>certificate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tatbīr</td>
<td>self-flagellation performed by some Muslims during Ashura commemorations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tawhīd</td>
<td>oneness of God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tazkiyat al-nafs</td>
<td>inner purification and struggle against the ego</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tekiya</td>
<td>Sufi house of worship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>türbe</td>
<td>tomb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʿulamāʾ</td>
<td>religious scholars, representatives of traditional Islamic learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ummah</td>
<td>congregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>urf</td>
<td>customs or knowledge of a society, literally: to know</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
waḥdat al-wujūd  spiritual union with God
wakīl  trustee, representative of the shaykh
wali allah  friends of God, saints
wird  ritual of a Sufi order, traditional ṭarīqa-specific prayers and invocations
wudu  ritual cleansing required before religious devotions
yakīn  certainty
zakāt  annual Islamic requirement of giving usually 2.5 percent of one’s wealth to charity, literally: to be clear, to grow, to increase
zarp  metal dagger
ziyāra  visitation, tradition of visiting other Sufi communities or tombs
zuḥd  asceticism
My first visit to Waterport with the intention of meeting the *shaykh* of the Alami Tariqa was in the summer of 2002. I recall standing in the dim hallway of a friend’s house, waiting to visit the nearby Sufi prayer house for an evening gathering. My friend and his family had been members of the *tariqa* for years and had agreed to introduce me. I dressed in modest black clothing, as was recommended. The scarf I wore had special significance because it was given to me when I was four years old while travelling in Turkey with my family. As I waited for the others to prepare themselves, I remember being anxious and excited about the evening.

I was raised in the United Methodist Church and had attended weekly worship services, Bible study classes, and took part in various mission and humanitarian trips sponsored by the church. It may seem that I was an unlikely candidate to be attending a Sufi Muslim gathering. However, since my early teenage years, I had been unable to deny a growing sense of emptiness in my life and a fierce yearning for God to draw me closer and direct my life. This desire was confounded by an awareness that I was unable to further spiritually develop with the resources that had helped me thus far. I could sense that a fulfilled life went beyond living in general contentedness, but I did not know how to develop into an actual disciple of Christ. Meeting Muslims while attending university who introduced me to Sufism appeared to be an answer to my prayers.

The faces that greeted me that evening at the Waterport *tekiya* were friendly and comforting. We sat on the carpeted floor, women together in one half of the small room, men in the other half. The *shaykh* spoke on many subjects, and the discourse included familiar stories from the Bible, quotes from the Torah, jokes, and recitations of the Qur’an in Arabic, the latter of which were unfamiliar to me.

During a pause in the discourse, the *shaykh* addressed my friend and inquired about me. He asked that I come to the front and introduce myself to the community. I remember talking awkwardly about my family and academic pursuits. This was the summer following my first year of university at SUNY Brockport, and I was studying social work, a focus that would soon change to psychology and sociology and then shift to international studies and religion in graduate school.

Two years after this meeting, I formally embraced Islam. Although I anticipated receiving an invitation to join the ranks of the Sufi students (*murīds*) shortly thereafter, it was not immediately forthcoming. As if to reinforce the dedication and patience required
of those on the Sufi path, the invitation was not offered until three years later, during the spring of 2007, at which point I was initiated as a murīd. The time of waiting gave me a chance to become better acquainted with the shaykh and the community. It allowed me to become personally convinced that the shaykh was sincere and had the gift of a spiritual adviser and that the community members were trying to pursue closer relationships with God. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been introduced to this ṭariqa.

During the three years I worked on this thesis, the world appeared to be going through tremendous difficulties. An oil pipe in the Atlantic Ocean, which had promised to explore the oil reserves in the Gulf of Mexico and possibly free America and Europe from dependence on Arabian oil, had burst, spewing millions of gallons of oil and tar into the delicate ecosystem of the ocean. The “Arab Spring” arrived with massive demonstrations and bloodshed throughout the Middle East. An earthquake and tsunami struck Japan, bringing with them destruction and a nuclear disaster. In Europe, the monetary system was floundering, having been damaged by economic devastation in Greece and Portugal. Although the American dollar initially experienced a surge on the back of the devastated euro, as the months passed, America also showed dramatic signs of weakness as unemployment rose and the housing market crashed. The crisis was particularly evident when American legislators raised the astounding debt ceiling to $14.3 trillion.

In the midst of economic instability, environmental disasters, and bloodshed, it seemed very appropriate to be writing about a community who was striving to be mindful of God and not be attached to material concerns. The Qur’an (18:7-8) states: “That which is on the earth We have made but as a glittering show for the earth, in order that We may test them as to which of the m is best in conduct. Verily what is on the earth We shall make but as dry soil and dust.” Some interpret these verses to imply that the state of the world will continue its decline and that the only lasting satisfaction is contained in the harmonious relationship with God.

This thesis serves as an introduction to the Alami Sufi community in Western New York, nestled between the shores of Lake Ontario and Lake Alice. In the following pages, this ṭariqa is initiated into the academic discourse with an exploration of how we practice Islamic Sufism in contemporary America. It is my hope that the readers come to better understand the spiritual dimensions of Islam through this study.

This work would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my supervisor Dr. Kate Zebiri. I would also like to thank my advisory committee including Dr. Cosimo Zene and Dr. Magnus Marsden. I am extremely appreciative of Shaykh Asaf
and the members of the Alami Tariqa for their generous cooperation and participation in this effort. My gratitude extends to my parents who have been enormously supportive of my studies and, in particular, to my mother for reading and editing this work.
INTRODUCTION

The Modern Implementation of Sufism in America

Although mainstream religions in America are facing challenges due to elements of modernity, the predicted widespread secularism has not occurred. Alternative religious movements are establishing themselves as unconventional options for individuals who are dissatisfied by the traditional religious institutions but do not reject belief in God. One of these alternatives is Sufism, which is often described as the mystical tradition in Islam although it is also established as a more universal, spiritual movement in Western societies.¹

The presence of Sufism in America is striking particularly since it was thought to be incompatible with the qualities necessary of a modern, rational society and therefore destined to experience a general decline by many scholars and modernist-minded Muslims and non-Muslims. To the contrary, Sufism has demonstrated adaptability and resilience, and it has become established in the West. Spiritual themes common in Sufism and popular Sufi writings, including Rumi’s thirteenth-century poetry and Idries Shah’s anecdotal stories, are found throughout American culture. Additionally, a number of Islamic Sufi orders (tariqas) are established across the continent that trace their spiritual lineages (silsilas) back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Alami Tariqa provides an example of Islamic Sufism in America. This traditional Sufi order was established in Waterport, New York, in the late 1970s by Shaykh Asaf of the Balkans. While striving to uphold the essence of shari‘a, it has adapted to this setting by acculturating to certain aspects of local culture and taking a somewhat gradual approach to Islamisation. The participants are mostly Caucasian and African Americans who come from Christian and Jewish religious backgrounds, in addition to a few European and South Asian immigrants. This study explores the phenomenon of Sufism in contemporary America by highlighting the philosophy and practices of the Alami Tariqa in Waterport.

¹ Identifying Sufism as “Islamic mysticism” has been problematised by Schönbeck (2009), who points out that in the American setting, Sufism has come to refer to an entity that may exist independently from Islam.
Aims of Study

The academic field of Sufism in America is relatively new, and, although it is still developing, there are several aspects which could benefit from greater attention. In particular, it has not been common to study the living tradition and document contemporary shaykhs (spiritual teachers) and murīds (students) in America. Few scholars have conducted detailed studies on specific tariqas and provided in-depth coverage. As Geaves, Dressler, and Klinkhammer (2009, 3) observe, “Comprehensive work on distinct Sufi traditions is almost nonexistent. Such studies ... based on fieldwork, are of crucial importance for a broader picture.” The erratic treatment by edited books has left many Sufi movements unrecognised, including the Alami Tariqa. There are also not many academic writings which delve into how Americans pursue religious lifestyles through Sufism and how they merge Western and Islamic concepts in their practice. Conducting detailed research on contemporary tariqas and living shaykhs is critical for expanding this field of study.

This study aims to explore how Islamic Sufism is implemented among the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, New York, its main international community. It does this by enquiring into three central points:

1) How did this tariqa become established in Waterport with its eclectic population of mostly Western individuals?

2) How has it acculturated to the American setting and retained its adherence to Islam?

3) How does it reconcile the Sufi aspiration of self-annihilation in God’s essence (fanā’) with living in modern American society?

The first question was inspired by the diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds of individuals in the Alami Tariqa. While a number of Sufi tariqas in the West consist of mostly homogeneous ethnicities, either immigrant or local identities, this community is a combination of American, European, and South Asian individuals. Notably, no members with a similar ethnicity as the founding shaykh live in Waterport. This study intends to shed light on how Shaykh Asaf drew from the American population of Muslims and non-Muslims and established this tariqa in Waterport. It does this by exploring its history (Chapter Two) and conversion narratives of present murīds (Chapter Four).
The second area of enquiry delves into how this tariqa has adapted to the American culture while retaining its adherence to shari'a. Many studies demonstrate the variations that exist between local Muslim cultural settings, and this thesis intends to benefit the literature on Islam in America. This study explores the relationship between acculturation and Islamisation, as evident in the Alami Tariqa’s initial gradual approach to introducing Islam in North America, followed shortly by its required adherence to the obligations (fard) of Islam and gradual increase of additional practices (sunna) (Chapter Three). It also delves into how this tariqa approaches the diverse population in America by offering both men and women of any ethnicity opportunities for spiritual advancement (Chapter Three). Additionally, it presents this tariqa’s contemporary social structure and activities (Chapter Two).

The third aim is to investigate the implementation of the Sufi aspiration of self-annihilation in God’s essence (fana’) in modern American society. This study initially explores common reasons of present murids for joining this tariqa and confirms that having a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God influenced many of them (Chapter Four). Then, it looks at selected ascetic practices of the Alami Tariqa which are intended to develop the relationship with God and facilitate a spiritual transformation (Chapter Five).

The Alami Tariqa provides an ideal example by which to study the phenomenon of Islamic Sufism in contemporary America. This small but thriving Sufi community has much to offer and has not yet been included in the literature. This tariqa community is unique among Sufi communities due to its large number of American-born members, its ethnically-diverse membership, and its required adherence to Islam. It was also easily accessible due to my membership in the order since 2007.

Justification

Case studies, despite being somewhat limited in applicability, have the potential to provide significant insight into a phenomenon and its larger implications. This study is particularly useful for exploring how individuals practice Sufism and have religious lifestyles in a modern, Western setting. Closer study of this religious community can shed light on the debate of religion’s role in society and the lives of individuals. It can also expand understanding of the cultural and social significance of alternative religions in the West. This includes how these alternatives reflect new trends in religion (Glock and
Bellah 1976; Roof 1993; Wolfe 2003) and the interaction between mainstream and alternative religions (Partridge 2004a; Jenkins 2000).

Studying the Alami Tariqa is also instrumental for understanding other issues involving the relationship between Islam and the Western world. Globalisation has brought together the “East” and “West” in unprecedented ways, resulting in both positive and negative developments (Huntington 1996; Barber 1995). Communities that bridge the “Western” and “Islamic” identities may be useful for creating more positive relationships and lessening the misunderstandings in this conflict, which is often oversimplified into “East verses West.” It is also worth exploring the ideas of “peace” and “justice” from a Sufi Islamic perspective (Bangura 2005; Muhaiyaddeen 2007). Sufism has been hailed as a more tolerant and acceptable form of Islam, particularly by Western politicians, and it can be found in war-torn areas such as Pakistan (Ahmed 2007). Therefore, this study has implications for international relations and policy makers. Additionally, as an example of a minority religious community in America, the Alami Tariqa offers insight into contemporary religious tolerance and Islamophobia.

Religious conversion is another topic which this study addresses. Jane I. Smith (1999, 69) describes embracing Islam through Sufism as an atypical occurrence in America, and Hermansen (2000) confirms that many Sufi practitioners do not formally embrace Islam. Most Sufi movements in the West with significant numbers of American-born initiates do not require formal religious conversion. Examples are Inayat Khan’s Sufi Order International and the Golden Sufi Centre, founded in America by Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee (Hermansen 2000). On the other hand, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Order, headed by Shaykh Nazim of Cyprus and his deputy in America Shaykh Hisham, forthrightly encourages the spread of Islam (Damrel 2006, 118). The Alami Tariqa also promotes Islam by requiring its *murīds* to embrace Islam. By looking at factors which were involved in the decision to join this *tariqa* and become Muslim, this study intends to shed light on the changing needs and desires of certain strands of American society.

Additionally, the Alami Tariqa is important to study and incorporate into the academic literature because of intrinsic qualities. The diversity of its membership is one

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2 It should be noted, though, that Sufism is not historically a nonviolent movement. A number of *tariqas* have participated in armed resistances, such as in the Chechnyan resistance in the nineteenth century against imperialism and the uprisals in Africa against colonialism.

3 There are many online articles on this topic including: http://www.smithsonianmag.com/people-places/Faith-and-Ecstasy.html?c=y&page=1 and http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2030741,00.html (accessed March 10, 2011).

4 See the leading article in *Time* magazine entitled “Is America Islamophobic?” by B. Ghosh (August 30, 2010).
factor which sets this ṭariqa apart from many other Sufi movements. Its founder and teacher, who inherently breaches the East-West divide because of his background from the Balkans, has initiated murīds in this ṭariqa from a wide variety of religious, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. The uniqueness of this diverse membership is increased by the distinct lack of murīds with the same ethnic background as Shaykh Asaf, demonstrating his ability to relate to a variety of individuals. This also shows that this ṭariqa exists without member support from the shaykh’s original Balkan ṭariqa community. According to Werbner (1996, 310), successfully establishing a ṭariqa in non-Muslim lands speaks to the “charismatic authenticity” of a shaykh.

Another distinctive factor of this ṭariqa is its minimalist approach toward increasing membership. Unlike the more ethnically-homogeneous movements which draw recent immigrants, the Alami Tariqa is required to attract new members from among the American population. However, this ṭariqa lacks formal advertisement. It does not have a website, nor does it host conferences and large gatherings in Waterport, which would draw those with interest to the community. Although a number of murīds have published books of poetry, journey stories, documentaries on Bosnia during the war, and coming-of-age fiction for young adults, in addition to more scholarly publications, none have commented on their affiliation to this ṭariqa or named the shaykh, thereby eliminating this method of propagation.5 Instead, increasing membership often involves out-of-the-ordinary experiences and interactions with an initiated murīd, who then introduces the individual to the ṭariqa if he or she is deemed to be sincere. Still, Shaykh Asaf has said that he does not usually initiate individuals as murīds unless he has known them for at least a year, during which an in-depth evaluation takes place.6 This approach differs dramatically from the extensive advertisement online and in publications common among other Sufi movements, including Shaykh Nazim’s approach of accepting murīds over the Internet.7 Understanding these differences in propagation can impact the way we understand alternative religions and factors which lead to the success of such movements (Stark 1996).

Studying the Alami Tariqa has both instrumental and intrinsic value. By incorporating this ṭariqa into the literature on Sufism in America, it will help increase knowledge and expand understanding of this phenomenon and the implications of

5 Due to confidentiality and anonymity, I am unable to list their publications.
6 Shaykh Asaf, overheard several times during the years, Waterport, N.Y. Typically, the youngest age to become murīd is 18, but occasionally it has occurred at 17.
contemporary religious lifestyles in the Western world. It is also an opportunity to appreciate the unique qualities of this ṭariqa and the American religious community which has been built around it.

Unfortunately, the scope of this study is limited by time and resources and does not cover many important issues and debates. For simplicity, the dispute surrounding the religious affiliation of Sufis is avoided (Sirriyeh 1999). For the purpose of this study, the individual’s self-indicated religion is accepted, while keeping in mind that a Muslim is recognised by the Islamic declaration of faith (shahāda). This study also tries to avoid placing value judgments on Sufi movements which differ dramatically from traditional Sufism and resemble the New Age phenomenon (Wilson 1998). Additionally, this is not a study in comparative religion nor does it explicitly compare Sufi movements beyond referencing others as supplementary examples.

This study has taken on the role of introducing the Alami Tariqa into the academic literature. Had more literature been previously published on this ṭariqa, it is likely that this study would have focused more directly on a single aspect of devotion. However, this not being the case, the reader will find a number of aspects presented, but none explored in the depth necessary for a thorough understanding. Future publications are expected to expand on these topics.

**Literature Review**

**Sufism in America**

Contemporary expressions of Sufism have received limited attention from academic scholarship until recently, and Sufism in America was barely mentioned prior to the mid-1990s. This can be seen in light of several reasons. First, the study of Sufism, as well as general awareness of the complexities and diversities in traditional Islam, has been deterred by the tendency of scholars to consider Sufism a “neo-Platonic mystical theosophy” separate from Islam (Geaves 2000, 3). It was common, particularly among Orientalists, to dismiss its contemporary practice and instead describe its origins, rise, impact, and subsequent decline (Baldick 1989, 153; Arberry 1969, 122). Also, Islamic Sufism was often mistakenly seen as incompatible with the desirable qualities of rational, modern society by many reformers and modernist thinkers both inside and outside of
Islam and considered to be limited to immigrant populations (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007; Geaves, Dressler, and Klinkhammer 2009).

Second, the study of Islam in America was relatively undeveloped until the 1990s, and Sufism, as a minority thread in Islam, was furthermore neglected. This was compacted by the actions of many Muslims in America, who portrayed Sufism as being “marginal to the concerns of most Muslims living in the United States and insignificant in terms of impacting American culture and institutions” (Hermansen 2000). Third, the noticeable emergence of Sufism with the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s led to the consideration that it was merely part of a religious phase which would decrease over time and, therefore, was not worth studying. However, the continued presence of Sufi movements has proved otherwise.

Over the last two decades, substantially more literature has emerged that recognises contemporary Sufism in the West and presents it as a lived religion important for both immigrant and local populations. In particular, edited books have highlighted its vibrancy and diversity in America. In Muslim Communities in North America, Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith (1994) include discussions on two Sufi communities including the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship by Gisela Webb and Baba Rexheb’s Bektashi Tariqa by Francis Trix. David Westerlund (2004) demonstrates different ways Sufism has acculturated to Western societies in his edited book entitled Sufism in Europe and North America, which has a chapter by Marcia Hermansen on the unique characteristics of Sufism in America. Sufism in the West, edited by Jamal Malik and John Hinnells (2006), includes several chapters that specifically explore the American setting. These consist of a history of Sufism in America with reference to the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship written by Gisela Webb, a typology of Sufi movements by Marcia Hermansen, and a case study of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa in America by David Damrel. Often, Inayat Khan’s Sufi Order International is proposed as a modern, Western version of Sufism, as seen in Celia Genn’s chapter in Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007). Also, Sufis in Western Society, edited by Ron Geaves, Markus Dressler, and Gritt Klinkhammer (2009), addresses the impacts of globalisation on Sufism. It includes a chapter written by Markus Dressler on how Sufis in New York are negotiating the American cultural context after the events of September 2001.

Another book which contributes to this topic is Sufism Today, edited by Catharina Raudvere and Leif Stenberg (2009). It approaches Sufism as an everyday, lived reality and highlights how translocal tariqas are negotiating tradition and globalisation and
interacting with other Muslim groups in Western settings. In particular, two studies discuss the American context. This includes Margaret Rausch’s chapter on the differences of the two branches of the Halwati-Jerrahi Tariqa, as apparent on their websites. Also, Oluf Schönbeck (2009) presents common ways in which the diverse manifestations of Sufism in the U.S. have been categorised by scholars and discusses the larger impact of academic discourses on the subsequent approaches by academics and upon the Sufi movements themselves.

Marcia Hermansen, professor of Theology at Loyola University in Maryland, is recognised as a leading scholar of Sufism in America. Some of her writings have already been included above. Among her notable contributions to the field, she proposes a “garden” typology for classifying the Sufi movements in America (1998), summarises Sufi movements by their tariqa affiliations (2000), and deciphers common literary themes in contemporary Western Sufi literature (2006a). She also attempts to distinguish between Sufism in America and Europe in her article “What's American about American Sufi Movements” (2004).

Scholars who hold membership in Sufi movements have added significantly to the literature. For example, Frances Trix (1993; 1994; 2008; 2009), an associate professor of Linguistics and Anthropology at Indiana University and member of the Albanian Bektashi Tariqa in Detroit, Michigan, has contributed to knowledge about the tariqa to which she belongs and her Albanian shaykh Baba Rexheb. Another example is Gisela Webb (1994; 1995; 2006), an assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at Seton Hall University and member of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She has written several articles and chapters on her Sufi order and also a history of Sufism in America. Other insider scholars include Daniel Atesh Sonneborn (1995), who explores the distinctive musical elements of Sufism in American through a Chishti-based Sufi centre in California, and Elliott Bazzano (2008), who researched spiritual healing and the Shadhili Tariqa, which is led by a Palestinian shaykh in America, for his Ph.D. dissertation through the University of California.

Sufi shaykhs and murids in America have additionally produced extensive literature as Hermansen (2006a) discusses. It is common for these writings to be generally on Sufism or teaching tools on a specific Sufi practice (Shah 1980; Haeri 1990). For example, Shaykh Hakam Moinuddin Chishti (1985) discusses physical and spiritual healing from the Sufi perspective. Shaykh Hisham (Kabbani 2004), son-in-law and successor of Shaykh Nazim of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa, presents abbreviated
versions of scholarly studies that have been conducted on the Naqshbandi Tariqa along with a discussion of the principles of the order. There are a number of books written by Sufis which explore their personal spiritual journeys (Ali 2004; Broadbeck 2008; Faye 2009). In his book *The Writing on the Water*, Muhyideen Shakoor (1988) describes learning experiences of being a *murād* in the Sufi path. In addition, a number of Sufi movements in America maintain websites which present the beliefs of their communities, advertise gatherings, and recommend readings (Qadiri Rifai Sufi Order 2002; Naqshbandi Sufi Way 2009; Shadhili Tariqa 2009).

The Alami Tariqa

The Alami Tariqa is scarcely mentioned in academic literature. An article by Bacht (2008), which identifies Shaykh Asaf as the grand *shaykh* of the Alami Tariqa in a footnote, is the only publication of which I am aware to mention this *tariqa* beyond my recent articles (2010; 2011). Three additional scholars have recorded Shaykh Asaf and his immigration to America, but they have not discussed this *tariqa* or its centre in New York (Abiva n.d.; Noormuhammad 1995; Hermansen 2000). The information provided by these scholars is very limited and sometimes outdated, for example Hermansen and Abiva refer to this *tariqa* as a Rifa’i Order, which was applicable until the early 1990s, at which point it was named the Alami Tariqa. None of the articles mention the community in Waterport, which was established in the late 1970s and is the main location of this *tariqa*.

Notably, literature originating from members of this community has also largely neglected to mention either the Waterport community or the name of the *tariqa*. This includes writings by Shaykh Asaf (2001; 2004) and the numerous books of fiction, non-fiction, and poetry authored by the *tariqa* members. Likewise, although the Internet has become a popular site for promoting Sufism, there is no website associated with this *tariqa*. Only the World Sufi Foundation located in Denmark alludes to its connection to Shaykh Asaf through a list of recommended readings and articles on its modest website, including those written by Shaykh Asaf, Benjamin Bacht, and myself.

Remaining out of the spotlight has been partially on purpose and has allowed the Alami Tariqa community in Waterport to develop and mature without additional

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8 See http://www.alevibektasi.org/xabiva.htm. Huseyin Abiva is also known as James Lee Abiba and as such wrote an unpublished report on Shaykh Asaf (2007), which is not generally publicly accessible. I was able to access it through my membership in the Alami Tariqa.

9 See http://www.wsf.dk/index.htm. The World Sufi Foundation is associated with this *tariqa*. In addition to America, the Alami Tariqa has *tekiyas* in Denmark, Sweden, Croatia, and Bosnia.
interference and attention from the media, critics, and others who may have a vested interest. A significant reason for the obscurity is that Shaykh Asaf considers self-promotion in Sufism to be repulsive as it suggests greed, selfishness, and pride, all qualities undesirable of Sufis. Applying discretion concerning religious identity has also been considered important among this ṭariqa due to the targeted harassment of the Alami tekiya (Sufi house of prayer) over the decades by local non-Muslims and the generally increased prejudice against Muslims in America since September 2001. Their awareness of potential danger is more easily understood considering the Balkan origins of this ṭariqa and the history of religious persecution there.

However, as philosopher George Berkeley said, “Esse est percipi” [To be is to be perceived]. The present research was conducted with the explicit permission of Shaykh Asaf to increase academic awareness and understanding of Sufism in America. In return, Shaykh Asaf requested to read this thesis prior to its submission. He checked for accuracy in the data and suggested a few minor alterations of the text. For instance, he provided more in-depth information on his background, which is found in Chapter Two. His input was beneficial, but minimal, and did not substantially alter the thesis.

The Research Context

The Alami Tariqa is found in the small, rural village of Waterport in Western New York State on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. This ṭariqa community was established in 1978 by Shaykh Asaf, who arrived in Canada for political reasons from Yugoslavia in 1969 and moved to the U.S. in the early 1970s. The ṭariqa was established in this rural setting based on intuitive guidance that is said to have been received by Shaykh Asaf.

At the time of my research, the ṭariqa community in Waterport consisted of nearly 100 individuals, 52 of whom were murīds. However, by the end of my study, three years later, the number of murīds had risen to 58. The ṭariqa was mostly made up of first-generation murīds and their children, many of whom were second-generation murīds, in their late 20s and early 30s. Attendance at Friday jum’a prayer services averaged 25 murīds and non-murīds, and gatherings conducted by Shaykh Asaf typically drew close to 50 individuals.

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11 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, February 10, 2012.
Although Shaykh Asaf is the leader of the *tarīqa* community, he has never resided in Waterport. The community is organised to function without requiring his physical presence, and he visits periodically. There is a chain of responsibilities, and communication is retained with Shaykh Asaf through e-mails, phone calls, and less conventional forms of interaction, including dreams. The community is kept informed of happenings and instructions through phone messages and meetings. Presently, two other *shaykhhs*, both American initiates of Shaykh Asaf, head the community in his absence. They are assisted by four *wakīls* (representatives of the *shaykh*). The assignment of duties within the community is further discussed in Chapter Two.

The main *tarīqa* community building is the *tekiya*, previously an old farm house surrounded by apple fields, which was made into a prayer house in the late 1970s. There is also a school organised by *tarīqa* members called the World Life Institute Education Centre (WLIEC) and a multi-purpose building which is used as a clinic for their summer orphan program. It is important to note that the World Life Institute has non-profit status and is not formally connected to the Alami Tariqa, although it is run by *tarīqa* members.

The village of Waterport exists within the larger town of Carlton, which has a total population of almost 3,000 individuals (Fact Sheet: Carlton Town 2000). There are few Muslims in Carlton other than those involved in the *tarīqa*, and the *tekiya* in Waterport is the only Muslim centre in this mostly Christian county since a nearby Shi’a mosque in Medina closed a few years ago and many of its members moved. Misinformation and prejudice against Islam has resulted in tensions and harassment of the *tarīqa* community, which culminated at the end of August 2010, during Ramadan, when seven teenagers from the local area were arrested after an incident involving gun shots near the *tekiya* and injuring a murīd with an automobile. Relations appear to be improving, however, because of humanitarian and interfaith programs organised by the *tarīqa* members and local religious organisations.

There are significant differences between the town’s profile and the *tarīqa* community’s profile which make the *tarīqa* community a unique part of the area. Most strikingly, the population of Carlton is 94 percent Caucasian and three percent black or African American (Fact Sheet: Carlton Town 2000). This contrasts dramatically with the *tarīqa* community in which just more than half of the *murīds* are Caucasian and the other

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half are either African American, South Asian, or of mixed ethnic backgrounds. Also, in Carlton only 16 percent have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher according to the 2000 Census. In contrast, the present research found that 78 percent of the murīds had received a bachelor’s degree or higher, and the most common professions of those in the tarīqa community were that of student and counsellor. It should be noted that a large majority of the individuals involved in the tarīqa are not originally from the Carlton area, but moved there mainly from Ohio and Canada.

The Research Participants

The target population of this study consisted of 52 murīds who lived in or near Waterport. This included those who resided in the community or one of the nearby villages and those who lived elsewhere, such as in Toronto, Canada, but had residences in Waterport and visited the Alami community at least a few times a month. Through the survey and interviews, a total of 38 murīds participated in the research, resulting in an involvement rate of 73 percent of the target population.

The diversity found among the murīds makes this tarīqa community distinctive. The total population of murīds living in or near Waterport includes 28 men and 24 women. Just more than two-thirds of the tarīqa members are first generation murīds (73 percent), and the other one-third have parents who are also murīds. A slight majority of murīds in Waterport are Caucasian (54 percent), followed by 37 percent African American, six percent South Asian, and four percent mixed ethnicities. A majority were born in the U.S. except for about seven who were born in Canada, three in South Asia, one in Europe, and another in Scandinavia. Seventeen of the murīds were born and raised Muslim, including both immigrants and second generation murīds. Among the murīds who participated in the surveys, their ages ranged between 21 and 83, with clusters around 60 and 27 years.

Based on the research results, the religious backgrounds of the previously non-Muslim murīds varied dramatically. Most of those who had embraced Islam were raised

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13 During my fieldwork, an individual became a murīd, raising the total number to 53. However, he was not included in the surveys or interviews. The surveys were collected prior to his initiation, and I wanted to keep the number of murīds consistent throughout my research. By the end of writing this thesis, the total number of murīds had increased to 58. This is an example of one of the difficulties of studying a living, dynamic phenomenon.

14 This is not based on the survey respondents. It is an overview of everyone in the tarīqa.

15 In other words, 28 are Caucasian, 19 are African American, three are South Asian, and two are mixed white and black.
Christian, except for four who were raised Jewish. Many had experimented with a number of different religious paths including various Christian denominations, Hasidic Judaism, Zen, Yoga, New Age Religions, Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Pipe Carrier in the Lakota Way (a Native American religion), and Gurdjieff’s teachings. Eleven murīds, all with African ancestry but one, indicated on the survey that they had embraced Islam prior to becoming involved in the tariqa. Regardless of these tremendous differences, the tariqa members form a tight-knit community united by faith in God and the common orientating point of the Ka‘ba, in Mecca, for prayer.

Methodology

An interdisciplinary approach was used for this study. It was guided by standard methodologies used in the social sciences and the study of religion. On-site fieldwork was conducted in Waterport with the Alami Tariqa between July 2009 and August 2010. It involved a written survey to gather representative data, 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with murīds, and active participant observation.

The General Research Perspective

In an attempt to prevent religion from being reduced and explained away by the functions it may perform, this study approaches religion broadly through the phenomenological lens. This philosophical movement was introduced by Edmund Husserl at the turn of the twentieth century and designates both a philosophy and a philosophical scientific methodology within the study of religions. As Moran (2000, 4) summarises, “Phenomenology is best understood as a radical, anti-traditional style of philosophising, which emphasises the attempt to get to the truth of matters, to describe phenomena, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is as it manifests itself to the consciousness, to the experiencer” (italics in original). This approach gives priority to personal experiences and explanations. This was useful in the present study because it helped avoid the tendency of reducing religion to a consequence of history, psychology, economics, or politics, which was common to the approaches of Marx, Freud, Weber, and Durkheim, and continues to be prevalent in the

16 For a more detailed exploration of phenomenology, see: Joseph J. Kockelman, (1994) Edmund Husserl’s Phenomenology (Purdue University Press).
social sciences (Tremlett 2008, 32). Using the phenomenological perspective allowed for greater acknowledgment and appreciation of the local voices and lived realities of those in the Alami Tariqa.\(^\text{17}\)

Using his theological position of natural religion, Tillich describes religion in this manner:

Religion is not a special function of man’s spiritual life, but it is the dimension of depth in all of its functions ... Religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern manifest in all creative functions of the human spirit ... in the moral sphere as the unconditional seriousness of moral demand ... in the realm of knowledge as the passionate longing for ultimate reality ... in the aesthetic function of the human spirit as the infinite desire to express ultimate meaning. (Tillich 1959, 7-8)

This perspective focuses on a broad, spiritual understanding of religion which transcends surface-level institutional and functional explanations. Tillich suggests religion to be innate to humankind and a gateway through which the temporal, sensual world may approach the age-old questions surrounding human existence. This differs from Marx’s belief that religion was a sedative for mankind devised to placate class-divided societies and Durkheim’s definition which primarily highlights religion’s role in expressing the sacred and profane (Davie 2007, 26, 30). However, it complements the phenomenological approach in which religion is considered to be “a symbolic expression of ‘the sacred’” (Penner 1989, 612).

The purpose of the methodology used in this study was twofold. Although I wanted to elicit and include original narratives of the murīds, I also wanted to learn about the general profile of the tariqa since this had never been documented. Selective quantitative methods were used to facilitate an understanding of characteristics associated with membership in this tariqa. Otherwise, qualitative methods were used to identify “what exists in the social world and the way it manifests itself” (italics in original) (Ritchie and Lewis 2006, 27).

During the research and writing, I continuously reflected on my approach, a technique similar to Grounded Theory. This study developed through a cyclical process of reflection and reassessment of the aims, fieldwork data, and literature. It was not directed solely by a hypothesis and questions, although these played a general guiding role. For example, during the research, I modified the interview questions based on

\(^{17}\) This approach was inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod’s (1993) book in which she empowered Egyptian Bedouin women by giving their narratives a dominant position in her work.
previous responses to elicit more complete answers. Also, while writing, the aims were repeatedly reformulated and the chapters restructured to better reflect the research material. Through this process, dominant themes surfaced, and the project took shape.

Research Methods

Ethnographic fieldwork provided the empirical basis of this study drawing upon empathy as understood in the phenomenological approach to the study of religion (Smart 1973). This methodology involves the “study of people in naturally occurring settings ... by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally” (italics in original) (Brewer 2000, 6). Ethnographies are highly valuable and often used in the social sciences because of their “interpretivist” approach, which enhances the researcher’s capacity for cultural understanding of social and personal meanings through both observation and participation. Bronislaw Malinowski (2002), who wrote Argonauts of the Western Pacific, was one scholar at the forefront of this concept, in addition to numerous other social scientists (Crapazano 1973; Geertz 1986; Levi-Strauss 1992). American anthropology especially embraced this methodology, which later became associated with the emic, as opposed to the etic or outsider approach (Headland, Pike, and Harris 1990).

Between July 2009 and January 2010, I resided in Waterport and participated in the everyday life of this ṭariqa community, after which observational research continued intermittently until the end of August 2010. In addition to conducting survey research and 14 interviews with the murīds, participant observation was used. A triangulation of methods similar to this was recommended by Denzin (2009, 26-27) to achieve a more thorough gathering of data and a higher validity for the conclusions. However, this concept of achieving higher validity by using more than one method is debated by scholars because dissonant results may still be accurate since one person’s perceived truth may differ from another’s (Ritchie and Lewis 2006, 44). Triangulation was used to provide a fuller picture of the community and become better informed of the intricacies than one research method would have allowed.

The survey, interviews, and participant observation provided data on practices and community events and details of experiences. The history of the Alami Tariqa in
Waterport was mostly supplied by a ʿtariqa member who is known as the ʿtariqa historian due to his note-taking and careful recording of dates and events. The information gathered from this individual was confirmed and supplemented by data from the interviews and informal conversations with other murīds.

The research was also supplemented by data from outside the ʿtariqa community. This included limited published and unpublished documents on the religious history of the area and an informal interview with the county historian, although she had limited knowledge of the ʿtariqa community. The librarians at the village library were helpful in suggesting books about local history and religious organisations, none of which, however, mentioned this religious community. They also guided me toward Census data on the town and county. Additionally, established friendships within the ʿtariqa helped to locate an unpublished document written by James Lee Abiba (2007) about Shaykh Asaf and his role in the Waterport community. The limited documentation of the Alami Tariqa by outside sources confirmed that this study would help fill a void in the literature.

Survey

A survey was used to involve a majority of the murīds living in or near Waterport in the research and achieve results which could be representative of the ʿtariqa murīds. The survey was a substantial, seven-page, anonymous questionnaire with 46 quantitative and qualitative questions. The question format varied mostly between Yes/No questions, short answers, and ranking of possible answers between one and five. The quantitative sections were developed to gather information about gender, age, ancestral backgrounds, reasons for joining the ʿtariqa and embracing Islam, if applicable, and levels of devotion to the formal practices of Islam. The qualitative questions provided space for written short answers and aimed to provide the research participant space to elaborate and provide individualised responses. These asked more generally about what attracted the members to this devotional path, the personal impact of being a murīd, what various practices meant to the individual, and their interactions with other Sufis, Muslims, and non-Muslims. An initial page was included with a short introduction to the study including its purpose, instructions, potential risks and discomforts, and confidentiality.

Being aware of the diverse population the survey was sampling, I tried to carefully word the questions. The questions evolved through discussion and feedback from other scholars, my parents, four Alami murīds who tested the survey (two who lived in
Waterport and two from Canada), and Shaykh Asaf, who ultimately gave permission for the study to proceed. Of particular importance was the word choice, especially when asking about conversion to Islam, since “conversion” is not considered by many tariqa members to be an appropriate idiom, and their rejection of this term may have disrupted the study findings. Therefore, this question was worded: “Have you been under shahīda your whole life?” and then requested the year of taking the shahīda and any previous religious affiliations. Still, some research participants who had been born and raised in another religious tradition initially denied that they had not been under the shahīda their whole lives. The other survey questions helped to clarify and check these answers.

Additionally, since some members have residences in both Canada and America, the questions referred to “North America” when indicating both Americans and Canadians and “United States” when only for those living in the United States. The length of the survey was also an issue of consideration, but at the time of distribution I felt that all of the questions could benefit the study. However, if I were to do the study over, I would eliminate certain questions, particularly those concerning relationships with other Sufis, Muslims, and non-Muslims, which did not elicit many beneficial answers. The survey included sections for non-Muslims, Muslims who were not murīds, and murīds, and the surveys were later separated.

The survey was distributed at the Alami tekiya in July 2009 with the request that all who participate in tariqa events or who are part of the community complete it. They were advised that participation was not compulsory, a sentiment reiterated by the shaykh, and that it was to be completed anonymously. A total of 42 surveys were returned, including 35 by local murīds, four by Muslim non-murīds who were children of murīds, and three by murīds visiting from out of the area. No non-Muslims participated. This spread of individuals provides a broad overview of those who frequent the Waterport tariqa community.

I received almost immediate feedback that there was concern because the surveys asked details which could give clear insight into the individual’s identity. I reiterated at the following weekly gathering that if someone was uncomfortable answering a question, that he or she could either broadly answer it or simply skip it and that any identities, if obvious, would not be shared. Others informed me that certain questions were not specific enough and that the rating scale (one through five) on a few of the questions did not indicate which rank was primary and which was lesser. Accommodations for this were made while coding and interpreting the data by eliminating the rating scale and
simply counting each indicated answer equally, disregarding the exact number assigned to it. Although less than five surveys had been returned three days prior to the deadline, after being reminded of the research, the community submitted 42 surveys. Several murīds approached me after completing it and commented on how they appreciated this exercise because it had stimulated thought and reflection on their experiences.

The returned surveys were assigned alphabetical IDs in an Excel spreadsheet. The short answers were numerologically coded and documented on the spreadsheet. The surveys which were completed by non-murīds and murīds not living in or near Waterport were separated out to better focus on the target population. Initial graphs of murīd characteristics were created. The longer, written answers were typed into Word documents, which were then coded for themes.

**Interviews**

In addition to the survey, 14 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with murīds. The interviews included a few quantitative questions which were similar to questions on the survey, and then used open-ended questions to gather representational experiences and insight into the subject matter. Although qualitative data cannot be generalised toward the target population, it has the potential of providing rich details on the subject. Three murīds who had not completed the survey were involved in the research through the interviews.

As noted earlier, the interview format evolved based on looking over a sample interview from my advisor Kate Zebiri’s research, feedback of practice interviews, and interactions during the interviews. Two pilot interviews were conducted with murīds in Waterport to test the wording of the questions, time limit, recording device, and location of the interview. Statistical information gathered from the pilot interviews, for example regarding gender, religious backgrounds, and age, was included in the final research, while their responses to the qualitative answers were not included. This was because of adjustments made to the questions and issues concerning one interview being recorded, which made it difficult to preserve the data.

The interviewees were chosen from the target population based on a process of selection aimed at gathering a broad representation of the ṭariqa. The 52 murīds were first divided into groups based on gender, which was next divided based on a simplification of ethnicity (Caucasian, African American, or other), and then separated according to the
generation of *ṭarīqa* membership (first or second generation). The resulting 12 groupings consisted of between one and 10 individuals. The three largest groupings each contained 10 *murīds*. These were the first-generation *murīd* African American women, Caucasian women, and Caucasian men. From each of these groupings, three individuals were interviewed, and the additional five interviewees were chosen from the other categories to represent the larger groups and equalise the number of men and women. Then, judgment sampling, availability, and willingness to participate factored into the final selection. Informed consent was attained from the participants, and all of the formal interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed to protect identities. A few did not respond to the invitation or declined to participate, and in these instances an alternative *murīd*, typically with similar characteristics, was invited to participate.

The questions covered a variety of topics. After the introductory section of questions, which asked whether the interviewees had completed the survey and collected data on age, ancestral heritage and country of birth, the questions moved to how they became involved in Sufism and how this involvement impacts their lives. Next, the questions centred on the *ṭarīqa* community and what it is like being part of this religious community. Another theme was the significance of required and supererogatory religious practices to their lives. Questions on gender and how this impacts progress in Sufism and personal choices of dress were also included. In addition, there were sections on the annual remembrance of Ashura and exploration of the concept of submission, including ultimately the spiritual concept of “dying before one’s physical death.” There were also various planned and unplanned prompting questions, which helped with the transition between questions. Depending on the loquacity of the interviewee, which seemed to increase as the research proceeded, the interviews lasted between one hour and four and one-half hours. All of the interviews were voice recorded.

The interview recordings were transcribed into Word documents, and names were removed or replaced with pseudonyms. The recordings were then eliminated to further protect the research participants. The transcripts were colour-coded for themes and similarities. Categories were identified (i.e. conversion, gender, and religious practices), and theories were tested and adjusted. The coding was difficult because the interviews were often substantial lengths, and the themes were discussed at different times and in various contexts throughout the interviews due to the conversation-like flow.

While interviews have the possibility of revealing meaningful insights into the topics being studied, it is important to note that the interviewee’s real-world actions may
differ from what is self-reported. It was recommended by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) to use vignettes to eliminate some of this discrepancy. These hypothetical or real-life scenarios supposedly allow the interviewees to place themselves in the scene more easily than would questions lacking context. Although I did not use vignettes during the interviews, the questions were structured to flow from one to the next and to encourage the participant to become immersed in the subject matter. Regardless, the overall truth-factor of interview results is never fully known, which is why the use of more than one method of data collection is advised to attain a more complete picture.

One community member, who was very involved in the țariqa but not an official murīd, was unintentionally invited for an interview, which took place. This interaction shed some light into possible different outlooks between murīds and non-murīds. Since it was limited to one interview with a non-murīd, the results cannot be generalised toward others. However, there was a notable difference in regard to personal investment in self-examination. Although this observation may simply reflect an unusual level of honesty or a difference in personality, its distinctiveness from the other 14 interviews brings me to consider that there is a difference in life-focus among murīds compared to non-murīds. Further research could explore this more.

Participant Observation

The third research method used was participant observation. There are various levels of participation, and the researcher adapts to these based on his or her negotiation with the community being studied. Due to my involvement as a murīd in the țariqa, this research required me to detach myself and participate in a way which allowed me to experience it anew. Therefore, my level of participation dropped from “pure participation” to “active participation” on Dewalt and Dewalt’s scale (2002, 18). It involved combining the typically opposite roles of detached observation and involved participation. While participating in the activities, I took notes and sometimes pictures and attempted to be aware of what was going on around me.

Data was collected through observation at the tekiya and around the Waterport community. I periodically documented attendance levels at weekly activities. I took notes during some events and talks held at the tekiya and free-wrote afterward. Although my initial intention was to write notes in “thick description,” meaning not only recording the visible world but also explaining it in the cultural context and using intelligent guesswork
to determine the purpose of actions and events (Geertz 1973), I ended up not taking as many detailed notes as planned. Informal discussions with murīds were used to inform my observations and double check my insider knowledge and assumptions, some of which needed minor adjustments. Participant observation was helpful for looking critically at events as an outsider while using insider knowledge and relating it to my own experience.

Permission to photograph the tariqa members was granted by both Shaykh Asaf and the individuals of the tariqa community. Due to my own discomfort, I brought out the camera only a few times during the research. However awkward taking photographs during solemn religious activities may be, no one raised any issue with my actions until I photographed the community performing jum’a prayers in the summer of 2010. One particular murīd became very upset and expressed a feeling of being violated by being photographed in a house of meditation and prayer. Not helping the situation, I had forgotten to turn off the flash on my camera and had accidentally illuminated the room when I took the first picture, and I was angled inappropriately to show too much of the faces of those present. I apologised to the community for the disturbance and showed my photographs to the murīd, asking whether I should delete them. She expressed approval of the photographs, and I was allowed to keep them, although I edited them later. This event served as a lesson in being subtle and respectful during research.

Ambitiously, in my research proposal I had also suggested doing a multidimensional study of religious practices, such as dhikr, and organising a focus group to gather historical data and create a document of the community’s history. Unsurprisingly, I did not pursue all of the proposed methodologies. Each of these could serve as a research basis for additional studies, but they were unnecessary and beyond my capacity to pursue at this time.

Insider Status

It is important to consider the relationship between the researcher and the subject because this impacts the research.\(^{18}\) Words are manifestations of existing power relations, and they elicit the politics of representation. Once it becomes accessible to others, “a discourse may be used to define, qualify, or disqualify groups and individuals in ways that are totally beyond its author’s control” (Schônbeck 2009, 187). Attempting to

\(^{18}\) Orientalists provide numerous examples. See Said’s (1978) critique of their practices.
understand the natural biases of the researcher is encouraged particularly by reflexive anthropology. Deborah E. Reed-Danahay (1997, 3-4) suggests that the researcher’s identity is constantly shifting, as each individual has multiple identities, some of which overlap and some of which contradict each other.

Due to the shifting and merging identities, the concept of “the researcher” and the inevitable power structures that accompany it are much more complex than implied by the terms insider and outsider. Although there is a clear difference between someone who participates in a religion and someone who studies a religion from an academic perspective, these stereotypical insider and outsider roles can be merged, such as when a researcher studies his or her own community, like the present study. A case in point is Lila Abu-Lughod (1993; 1999), a Palestinian-American professor of Anthropology and Gender Studies at Columbia University who studies issues of women’s rights and Middle Eastern women’s sources of power. While she shares ethnic, gender, and religious identities with the women she studies, she diverges from them by her role as researcher, living in the West, and being married to an American.

In 1967, Kenneth Pike highlighted two basic approaches to research by coining the terms emic and etic based on the words phonemic and phonetic in linguistics. The emic approach describes those who study behaviour “as from inside the system” whereas the etic approach refers to study “as from outside of a particular system” (1967, 37). Traditionally, ethnographic fieldwork and insight from insiders assists the researcher to move from an etic viewpoint of theories and outside observations toward an emic viewpoint, which understands the intricacies of the cultural-specific situation. Alternatively, an insider researcher coming from the emic position must manage personal and group beliefs and practices with outsider understandings. Thus, Geertz (1974, 28) suggests that the researcher exists on a scale of degrees between “experience-near” (having insider familiarity) and “experience-distant” (having outsider familiarity) and that in order to further the study of human behaviour and beliefs, the goal should be to take the insider knowledge, remove it from immediate confinements, and apply it to the abstract academic theories.

In the present study, I am considered an insider because of my membership in the Alami Tariqa since 2007. In my role as researcher, however, I felt somewhat like an

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19 Due to my membership in the Alami Tariqa, my research is a form of autoethnography. An autoethnography may refer to conducting an ethnography of one’s own group or writing an autobiography while conducting an ethnography (Reed-Danahay 1997, 2). The former type of research is common when, for example, a formerly-colonised community is studied by one of their own instead of by an outsider (Mutua and Swadener 2004), and it often deals with the politics of power relations and representation.
outsider because of my Christian background and also because I had not lived with the community in Waterport beyond the 2005/2006 academic year, when I attended classes at a nearby university prior to officially joining the *tariqa*. In reference to Reed-Danahay’s (1997) comments regarding the shifting identities of researchers, my identity as a *tariqa* member was still being formed at the time of the research. Although I was “one of them” and familiar with the community, its beliefs, and activities, I could often relate as an outsider because of my background. In taking on the role of researcher, I began straddling these identities even more, embracing my outsider identity to inquire into aspects an insider may not question. In some ways, being a researcher and, for example, taking pictures or writing notes during religious services caused me to feel as an outsider in my own community.

For a researcher with insider status, there are advantages as well as challenges. Particularly among traditional Sufi *tariqas*, where there is usually a strong emphasis placed on trust and secrecy, previously-established connections facilitate research. Insider researchers are assets to this academic field because they have unique access to interviews and knowledge that an outside researcher may not. They also understand the structures of the *tariqas* and have insider awareness of the practices and beliefs. However, insider researchers often have a specific ethical responsibility to the community since membership signifies worthiness of that individual to be included in the inner Sufi circle (*halqa*), and it involves an expectation that he or she will use caution when sharing sensitive material. Outsiders would likely find it difficult to conduct ethnographic research in Sufi communities, particularly with the Alami Tariqa due to its wariness of outsiders.

Familiarity with a subject can be useful for facilitating and conducting a study, but it can also interfere with observation and analysis. One difficulty involves maintaining critical distance and objectivity. If the goal is to be detached, critical, and balanced in the research, is this possible for an insider? The research will likely require the insider to challenge hitherto unquestioned beliefs or practices. How does the scholar negotiate the tensions that arise from the variations found within religions? What sort of obligations and responsibilities does the researcher have regarding the community being studied versus the academic community? Being an insider may test the researcher’s loyalty, for

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20 For example, GhaneaBassiri (1997, 14) had difficulty receiving permission to conduct his research with an Iranian Sufi order during his study of Muslims near Los Angeles, California. Also, Waugh (1999) was ultimately dismissed and unable to complete his interview with a *shaykh* of the Shadhili Tariqa in Morroco after admitting that he was not Muslim.
example, when something unpleasant is observed or uncovered during the research. These are important ethical and methodological issues to consider.

Scholars hold divergent views on whether or not a researcher with insider status is better to portray the genuine member-view than an outsider researcher (Kristensen 1960, Pike 1967). The insider researcher has an initial solid advantage over an outsider because of his or her established connections and advanced understanding of the insider world view. However, in addition to the potential difficulties discussed, the insider researcher may not necessarily have the skills or ability to better represent and analyse the community than someone coming from outside. In addition, over familiarity can cause blind spots that shroud awareness of important details and may lead to a skewed portrayal. To overcome this, it is advised to attempt to experience the subject matter as an outsider. Talking with other academics about the research, presenting initial findings at conferences, and trying to approach the study through fresh, new eyes can help to reduce this difficulty. Another potential disadvantage is that the research participants may exaggerate their personal accounts of acceptable behaviour with an insider based on fear of being judged.

In the present study, I have tried to be aware of these ethical questions and possible difficulties. I acknowledge that, although I attempted to take a neutral standpoint in my presentation of the Alami Tariqa community, I was not an impartial researcher. Using my “experience-near” insider advantage, I endeavoured to benefit the “experience-distant” social sciences through critical inquiry. In this study, I accepted the challenge of looking deeper into my own community and presenting it to the outside world.

The politics of representation are of particular importance for this study because of the precarious position held by Muslims in America. This country has a long history of intolerance regardless of espousing religious freedom in the Declaration of Independence, and Muslims have been systematically misunderstood and demonised by the media (Shaheen 2001). The after-effect of the events of September 2001 brought this underlying prejudice against Islam to the forefront, and harassment against those who were assumed to be Muslim increased. However, awareness and understanding of Islam also grew as a result of Americans researching Islam and reading the Qur’an. Regardless, there is a tendency to minimise the diversity found within Islam, often to the detriment of moderate-minded Muslims, and to over generalise based on negative stereotypes.

For numerous reasons, this research involved important ethical considerations. To protect the identities of the tariqa community members, anonymity is upheld, and names
are replaced by pseudonyms except for Shaykh Asaf’s, who agreed to have his name included. Gender and other personal characteristics were retained to more accurately portray the community. Informed consent was also an important aspect of the data collection. The surveys and interviews included an explanation of the study, and the participants indicating consent by checking a box and dating the page. It informed the participants of the voluntary nature of participation, any expectations, and how the data would be used, including possible publications beyond the thesis. It also limited the age of participants to those older than 16, an age limit which worked well for this study since Shaykh Asaf typically does not accept *murids* younger than 18 years of age. During observational research, when it was impractical to gather informed consent, I attempted to clearly distinguish myself as a researcher by taking notes openly and thereby alerting people to the fact that their actions or statements might be documented and giving them the choice as to whether to be present or contribute.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter One lays the foundation for discussing contemporary Sufi movements in America. It begins by presenting a theoretical framework of religion and modernity in the West. Then, the religious environment in contemporary America is explored, particularly the presence of alternative religions. Following this, Sufism is introduced and its manifestations in America are discussed including its history, contemporary expressions, and qualities which distinguish it from manifestations of Sufism elsewhere.

Chapter Two provides a closer look at the Alami Tariqa in Waterport. This *tariqa* is presented as an example of third-wave Sufism in America because of its engagement with issues emerging from globalisation and those of existence beyond the first generation. In this chapter, Shaykh Asaf and this *tariqa’s* Balkan roots are presented. Also, the history of the *tariqa* community in Waterport is presented by dividing the years into particular stages of development. In addition, the contemporary leadership, membership, and activities are discussed.

Chapter Three delves into how this *tariqa* has acculturated to the American setting in regards to ethnic and gender issues. It looks at the relationship between acculturation and Islamisation and how this *tariqa* is striving to uphold the *shari‘a* in this Western setting. It explores how this *tariqa* has engaged with the ethnically-diverse population in America compared to other Sufi movements. Following this is a discussion on the
involvement of women and the ʿariqā community’s approach to leadership roles, clothing, and gender relations.

Chapter Four discusses embracing Islamic Sufism by exploring how the present murīds became part of this ʿariqā. Based mostly on the survey research, the most common reasons for joining this ʿariqā are explored and compared with the literature. Based on their shared experiences, the murīds are separated into three categories for further discussion. The first category includes previously non-Muslims who accepted Islam due to their interest in the ʿariqā. The second includes previously non-Muslims who embraced Islam before interacting with Shaykh Asaf or joining the ʿariqā. Those who were born and raised Muslim are in the third category. Common themes in their conversion narratives are highlighted, and a possible connection between ethnicity and a particular route to Sufism is presented.

Chapter Five explores the gnostic element of contemporary Sufism by highlighting the role of ascetic practices in the Alami Tariqa. It looks at how the murīds are pursuing a spiritual path toward self-transformation while remaining active participants in modern American society. Four ascetic exercises (zuhd) are presented including dhikr (remembrance), spiritual retreats (khalwats), self-examination (muhāsaba), and the annual commemoration of Ashura. Following a description of the exercises, the chapter includes contemporary discussions and impressions relayed by the murīds that briefly explore their personal meanings and impacts.
CHAPTER ONE

Sufism in America

Jay Kinney (1994), the publisher and editor-in-chief of *Gnosis* magazine, writes that “Sufism undeniably exists as a living esoteric tradition of human transformation and as such is a valuable resource for the Western seeker.”¹ This statement demonstrates both the appeal and confusion in the West that surrounds Sufism. Kinney unwittingly misidentifies Sufism as stemming from esotericism rather than from Islam. His statement draws attention to the intimate connection that Western seekers sense with Sufism, and the similitude between the experiences of those on any spiritual journey to those following the Sufi Path. As Hodgson (1974, 28) comments, “It is often far easier for congenial temperaments to understand each other across the lines of religious or cultural traditions than it is for contrasting temperaments to make sense of each other’s faith even when they follow the same cult and utter the same creed.”

Sufism, although it intimately relates to universal spirituality, is historically, philosophically, and theologically bound to the tradition of Islam. However, this is not well acknowledged in America. In this religious environment, there are spiritual and religious movements and organisations that claim to be Sufi, but are minimally, if at all, related to Islam. Since a number of these have lasted beyond the hippie culture of the 1960 and 1970s, this increases confusion concerning the ancient (and Islamic) tradition of Sufism.

This chapter presents a framework for understanding the contemporary presence of Sufism in the U.S. within the debates of religion and modernity. Following a brief discussion of secularisation theory, it explores the American religious environment and the presence of alternative religions. Next, Sufism is introduced, and its relationship with modernity is discussed. Then, the chapter delves into Sufism in America with a historical overview and discussions on its varied manifestations and distinct characteristics from Sufism elsewhere in the West.

Religion and Modernity in the West

Traditional, mainstream religions in America and Europe are facing challenges resulting from elements of modernity, including unprecedented global interactions, increasing secularisation, and the prevalence of pluralism. Consequently, traditional religious organisations are experiencing lower attendance, and there has been an influx of individualised spiritualities and alternative religions taking root in the West. However, scholars have debated whether these changes reflect an inevitable decline of religious influence or a more complex interplay of secularisation and sacralisation.

Secularisation theory and the theories loosely generalised under it propose that as societies mature and industrialise, religion, especially the concept of the supernatural, will fade from the public sphere and be limited to people’s personal lives, if it remains at all (Hadden 1998; Bruce 2002). As Peter Berger (1999, 2) summarises, “Modernisation necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals.” Scholars who support this thesis argue that religion is more religious in the public than private arena, where it lacks support from societal structures and is subject to individual reinterpretation (Dawson 2004, 89). This theory has roots in the French Revolution, Enlightenment, and Protestant Revolution, among earlier events (Carroll 2009; Partridge 2004a). Notably, Nietzsche (1882), in section 108 of The Gay Science, stated famously that “God is dead” and deemed society no longer capable of recognising the divine, and Weber (2003) predicted an inevitable “disenchantment of the world.” Disagreeing with the widely-held unilateral model of secularisation theory, Martin (1979; 2005) introduced social differentiation and temporal elements which attempt to explain variations among societies throughout the centuries. Defending and clarifying the thesis in his book God is Dead: Secularization in the West, Bruce (2002) also presents a complex secularisation paradigm. He states that the process involves, among other essentials, “a long-term decline in the power, popularity and prestige of religious beliefs and rituals” and suggests that atheism is not the definitive or only outcome (Bruce 2002, 30, 44).

However, particularly since the mid-1900s, the concept of wide-spread secularisation has been critiqued. A modern, industrialised society with religious pluralism, which necessitates the individual to personally identify with a religion rather than simply follow familial or cultural traditions, has not necessarily led to a less religious society. Peter Berger (2001, 194), who revoked his original support2 of the secularisation

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theory, declared, “If I look back on my earlier work, I would say that I was wrong about secularisation, but right about pluralism. I misunderstood the relation between the two: the latter does not necessarily lead to the former (vide the American case).” Likewise, prominent sociologist of religion Rodney Stark stated:

Let us declare an end to the social scientific faith in the theory of secularisation, recognising that it was the product of wishful thinking ... After nearly three centuries of utterly failed prophesies and misrepresentations of both present and past, it seems time to carry the secularisation doctrine to the graveyard of failed theories, and there to whisper ‘requiescat in pace’ [rest in peace]. (Stark 1999, 269-270)

The theory of widespread secularisation is now widely questioned regarding most of the world, although Western Europe may be an exception (Martin 2005, 47).

The observable increase of alternative religions taking hold in Western societies and the decreased strength of traditional religious institutions has sparked debate concerning the long-term role of alternative religions in secularising societies. Some scholars have argued that the expressions of religion and spirituality that are new in the West are confirmations of secularisation theory (Wilson 1976). This understanding is based on the underlying rejection of the established religions in modern times and a conviction that belief systems which are not externally maintained by social structures are unable to replace the traditional religions. Also, the level of commitment of individuals who change religions in a plural society is sometimes called into question. Therefore, Voas and Bruce (2010, 59) state that the New Age is a “symptom” of secularisation, similar to the flickering embers of a dying fire, and, as such, “the sacred is giving way to the secular.”

This standpoint, however, discounts the individual’s autonomy in determining his or her own religion. It favours hereditary religious membership above the individual’s conscious decision and considers the latter to be weaker. To the contrary, when religion is chosen based on an individual’s free choice, this often indicates a strong religious commitment. In a religiously plural society, it is not unusual for some of the population to change religious memberships and participate in alternative options. Often times, alternative religions have established social structures around the world, and in a time of unprecedented facilitated global communication, distance is no longer a hindrance to devotion. The presence of alternative religions in contemporary society demonstrates that there is a need for options other than the traditional religions. Also, history reveals that it
is possible for alternative religious movements to become established religions over time. Two examples include Islam in Indonesia and Christianity in Central America.

It is theorised that secularisation could be part of a recurring pattern throughout history that produces better adapted forms of religion. Commitment to traditional religious institutions in America is observed to fluctuate as the society experiences population changes and dramatic economic or social events (Cross 1982; Jenkins 2000; 20). According to Partridge (2004a, 40), alternative religions which withstand the test of time and become established religious institutions are likely to be “more hardy and resistant to disenchanting forces” because of emerging from the “dialectical process of the sacralisation of the secular and the secularisation of the sacred.” Likewise, Jenkins (2000, 21-22) notes that throughout history, alternative religions have provided competition for the established religions by often being less diluted and better adapted to the contemporary society, providing for the spiritual and religious needs and desires of a population.

Also, for many individuals, rationality and secular points of view do not satisfy the deeper questions involving the meaning of life, and this supports the continual presence of religion and spirituality in society. Kieran Flanagan (2010), professor of sociology at the University of Bristol, finds the current situation of Western society particularly reflective of the need to reconnect to the sacred because of renewed awareness of the limited ability of humanity to prevent or change events:

The traits of postmodernity, the nihilism and cynicism that marked concerns in the 1990s, have now encountered limits of disbelief; hence the turn to hope, to trust and to the need to consider matters of ultimate veracity ... The millennium celebrations also brought matters of the ultimate into focus, but above all the terrorist attack of 9/11 intensified a sense that the spiritual did count ... The rise of religious fundamentalism in the Middle East and in the West and worries about the environment and climate change added to a sense of how diminutive the self had become in the face of forces that increasingly had a potential to engulf. (Flanagan 2010, 5)

For many, when confronted by unexplainable forces, rational and secular points of view do not satisfy the larger questions about life. As Partridge (2004a, 46) states, a secular and disenchanted world is ripe for re-enchantment. The following section presents the American religious environment.
America’s Founding Fathers, including George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and others, sought to establish a country in which religion was a personal choice and recognised as a God-given right. Instead of establishing the U.S. as a “Christian nation,” laws were set in place to honour the individual’s choice of religion and keep the government from interfering (Meacham 2006, 18-19). To prevent authoritarian rule, the Church was officially separated from the State, meaning that the government cannot be directly involved in religion and, likewise, that religious institutions cannot use state-owned facilities. However, a form of “public religion” was cultivated to unify a nation of eclectic believers, encourage morality, and lead to successful state-building (2006, 22-23). Now, in the 21st century, religion continues to play a predominant role in the lives of Americans even though many Western countries are experiencing a tendency towards secularity.

Amanda Porterfield (2002, 1), historian of American religion and professor at Florida State University, suggests that religion in America can be easier understood by thinking of the environment as a forest ecosystem. In this analogy, there are certain elements which provide fertile ground for newer developments, including ideals instilled by the early settlers and political leaders. The early religions (ancient trees) provide the nutrients and soil for subsequent religious movements, some of which thrive in the environment and reach maturation.

Religion and Religious Freedoms

The colonies in early America were typically modelled after the British monarchy, and either Puritanism or the Church of England often assumed official leadership roles. However, this coupled civil and religious system of governance did not last due to several factors. A major reason was the undeniable presence of different religions (Corbett 1999, 14). There were numerous Christian sects, including the Puritans, Quakers, Mennonites, Amish, Adventists groups, and Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints (i.e. Mormons). Jews are reported as having arrived with Columbus, in addition to a greater number coming later as immigrants, including those in 1654 fleeing religious persecution in

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3 Rhode Island was the most liberal colony at the time because it was chartered for both individuals with and without religious affiliations. Maryland was chartered for both Protestants and Catholics (Corbett 1999, 79). Pennsylvania, chartered by William Penn of the Quaker Religion, allowed for greater religious pluralism.
Brazil (Meacham 2006, 58-59). Muslims were also present early on, likely before
Columbus’ arrival (Mroueh 1996; Van Sertima 2003), and subsequently in increasing
numbers due to the Slave Trade (Austin 1984). Additionally, agnostics and those
ascribing to other belief systems, such as the Spiritualists, were present in America
(Corbett 1999, 13).

Another determining factor was the strong sense of disillusionment and
dissatisfaction with totalitarian control among the settlers in America. It was not
uncommon for them to experience harsh laws imposed by both imperial powers and local
governments. For example, in 1610 Sir Thomas Gates arrived in Jamestown, Virginia, to
instigate orders from England called: “Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial” (Meacham
2006, 42-43). As a result, the attendance twice daily at religious services was enforced by
denial of food, whipping, and imprisonment. Similarly, in Connecticut in 1650, the local
government decried that belief in any God other than the “Lord God” would result in
death (Meacham 2006, 53). Establishing protection from authoritarian control and
protecting religion from being adulterated by unscrupulous political leaders were
considered priorities in the developing nation.

In addition, the physical landscape of America was imbued with qualities which
encouraged freedom and made the formation of an established church difficult. Moving
farther West, into the frontier, was an available option to escape unjust or unpopular laws.
For example, in the 1830s the members of the Church of Jesus Christ Latter-Day Saints
settled in the northern frontier of Arizona, which was buffered from the rest of settled
America by the Grand Canyon, to escape religious persecution for their practice of
polygamy (Jenkins 2000, 19). The unruly frontier and vast landmass was not conducive to
a united civil and religious rule.

After the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence from Great
Britain in 1776, the U.S. Constitution was written, followed by amendments, called the
Bill of Rights. Along with establishing the executive and legislative powers, they set the
framework for contemporary religious freedom. Religion was recognised as a personal
choice that is separate from, but protected by, the federal government. Civil investment in
the ideal of religious freedom, while not always honoured to the fullest, indirectly
couraged religious vitality and pluralism.

There are three specific points in the Bill of Rights which relate to religion
including the First Amendment, the 14th Amendment, and Article Six. The First

\[4\] Refer to the trial of Anne Hutchinson and the treatment of African slaves and Native Americans for
effects of religious intolerance.
Amendment, which was ratified effective in 1791, prohibits the federal government from interfering with religion: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ...” This powerful declaration had several consequences on the religious environment. First, it set the stage for religious experimentation and the establishment of novel and different religious movements (Porterfield 2002, 8-9). Second, it promoted religious pluralism, which implies informed respect and appreciation of other religions, as a cultural trend. Third, the second clause of this amendment is interpreted by many, but not universally, to suggest that religious freedom is implicit for a genuine religious life and that coercion impedes this experience. Therefore, high worth was given to individual decision-making, and this set the stage for greater cultural acceptance of religious conversion. An additional impact is that this clause weakens the concept of one religion being the only one leading to salvation, effectively denying the U.S. from ever becoming an exclusively Christian nation.

The remaining two references expand the concept of individual religious freedom. The 14th Amendment, which was added in 1868, limits the rights which states hold over their citizens by declaring, in section one, that no state may “abridge the privileges” of those residing within their boundaries, including those pertaining to religion. Article Six, paragraph three, does away with a traditional Puritan concept of a religious requirement for holding public office by stating that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” In this way, the U.S. firmly established a unique environment in which religion continued to play a vital role in society but was not innately related to the government, thereby restraining both government and religious institutional control.

New Religious Movements and the New Age

Alternative religions have been a constant feature of the religious landscape in America. According to Jenkins (2000, 7), holding esoteric beliefs and fluctuating between religious affiliations is “so persistent a theme of American religion that it constitutes a separate tradition running parallel to better known and much larger schools like liberal Protestantism, evangelical enthusiasm, or the Catholic heritage.” Alternative religions and individual spiritualities experienced unprecedented growth particularly after 1945 (World War II) and 1960 due to the increased emigration from countries with large non-Christian
followings, easier travel, and unprecedented global communication (Partridge 2004b, 14-15).

To better discuss religion, sociologists conceptualised a three-part model of religious establishments: church-sect-cult (Melton 2004a, 18). Churches are identified as the dominant, religious establishments. In contrast, sects are typically revivalist movements which develop out of protest against perceived relaxation in strictness within the established religions (Melton 2004a, 27). They act as alternatives to the normative religions by retaining fundamental beliefs, strict practices, and enthusiastic worship services (Partridge 2004b, 18). Martin Marty (1960, 129) stresses the importance of isolation from society for religious sects and that they are known for requiring a strong commitment from insiders. This category emerged from the distinct proliferation of Protestant movements throughout America.

“Cult” was coined in the 1890s to describe the new religious growths which were emerging in the U.S. (Jenkins 2000, 4). It was applied to movements that deviated from orthodox Christianity and were considered heresies, such as Christian Science and Spiritualism. However, “cult” was limited in applicability toward non-Christian religions and heavily distorted by the negative press associated with the alleged brainwashing hype and reactionary anti-cult movements. Therefore, it has been systematically replaced since the 1960s in American scholarship by “New Religious Movements” (NRMs), which is a direct translation of the Japanese term shin shukyo (Melton 2004a, 19-20).

NRMs are notoriously difficult to define because they lack a set of characteristic features. Despite the name, most NRMs are not new, in the sense of original, religions. Instead, they are more often religious traditions found in foreign settings or reinventions of established religions. Melton (2004a, 21) discusses NRMs as religious movements which the society determines to diverge beyond the acceptable limits of the dominant religious culture and therefore exist in contested space, misunderstood, disliked, and often feared by the general public. In the West, they have at least one of the following features: 1) a theology which differs from traditional beliefs or a non-Christian ideology, 2) distinctive practices and behaviours which stem from their beliefs, 3) other qualities of distinction, for example: different sexual ethic, violent or illegal behaviour, communal life, dietary or medical restrictions, and millennial beliefs (Melton 2004a, 28-29). For clarification, some scholars limit NRMs to a certain time period, such as after 1945 or

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5 Until recently, European sociologists united the “sect” and “cult” categories, unlike American scholars who made the distinction throughout the 1900s (Melton 2004a, 16).
1960. Partridge (2004b, 20), for instance, restricts NRM to those which “emerged or rose to prominence during the twentieth century” (italics in original).

Although the “church-sect-NRM” model is beneficial in its simplicity, it has critical limitations that diminish its applicability. Primarily, this model is shaped by assumptions and underlying cultural concepts of the Western Christian tradition which restrict the model at a very basic, conceptual level. Unless the history behind these concepts is explored, this predisposition and its effects may be obscured to many, particularly those from within the cultural system. This Christian-centred approach does not allow non-Christian traditions to be incorporated on their own terms, but rather on terms familiar and applicable to the dominant religious culture. Categorising all non-Christian religions as NRM does not recognise other religions as being older than Christianity, nor does it recognise the presence of global traditions in the West, some of which have been present for many centuries. Thus, this model is limited in cross-cultural awareness and ill-suited for the study of religions in a religiously plural or non-Christian society.

For instance, attempting to apply the “church-sect-NRM” model to Islam demonstrates the inadequacies of this framework. Within the global tradition of Islam, there are five recognised legal schools (madhhab) of jurisprudence, including four Sunni and one Shi’a. Therefore, the dominant “church” varies depending on the madhhab and cultural-specific influences, which likewise impact whether or if certain other forms of Islam are considered less acceptable within the local context. Also, the category of sect does not correctly apply to either Sunni or Shi’a Islam, which may be surprising to many Westerners. Sunni Islam is not a revival movement, but refers ideally to those who are following the sunna (tradition) of the Prophet Muhammad, the large majority of Muslims; and Shi’a Islam began as a political movement.6

Additionally, Sufism, which is also at times erroneously identified as a sect of Islam, does not fit into the model’s categories. This is because Sufism is not actually a movement, but a devotional approach to Islam that has become institutionalised over time and thus became (mis)identified as a separate entity. As the famous saying attests, “Sufism today is a name without a reality, whereas it was once a reality without a name” (Ernst 1997, 25). A number of scholars studying contemporary Sufism in Western settings identify Sufism as a NRM, which I would discourage. Regardless that Sufism is relatively new to Western societies and is attracting local participants, it remains an

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6 “Shi’a” comes from “Shi’at Ali” or supporters of Ali.
ancient tradition intricately connected with Islam historically, theologically, and philosophically and is well established and considered mainstream in many countries worldwide.

However, innovative and unorthodox developments have emerged, particularly in Western societies, which self-identify as Sufi but differ from traditional țariqa, sometimes dramatically. These Sufi-inspired movements and organisations have developed out of dynamic interactions with the local setting, and they offer Westerners alternative avenues for spiritual development. They sometimes diverge from traditional Sufism in regards to their religious orientation to Islam and organisational components, among a variety of other adaptations. Under the larger canopy of Sufism, scholars have identified these by different names including “New Age Sufism” (Smith 1999, 68), “modern, Western Sufism” (Genn 2007, 257), and “post-țariqa Sufism” (Hermansen 2009, 30).

The New Age phenomenon is recognised by a host of eclectic alternative spiritualities and “holistic milieu activities” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The basic premise of the New Age is the sacredness of the self, and this unites the otherwise disjointed teachings and activities that generally fall into this category (Heelas 1996). Those involved in the New Age are typically attempting to reconnect with the divine within themselves and progress away from the “contaminated self” to “that realm which constitutes our authentic nature,” bringing about a new beginning (Heelas 1996, 2, 9). As is the case of NRMs, the “new” in New Age does not necessarily equate to original or novel. Instead, the newness often refers to the number of Western individuals who have participated in these activities over the last 40 to 50 years. Sufism, along with Buddhism and Taoism, has strongly impacted the “formation and character of the New Age,” in particular the element of transcending the ego (Kőszegi 1992, 211). For example, Inayat Khan’s Sufi Order in the West specifically helped to shape the New Age beginning in the 1960s.

Whether Sufism should be considered part of the New Age has been debated. Some scholars assert that Eastern teachings in the West should universally be considered part of the New Age, including Heelas (1996, 55). In contrast, others recommend that the features of the Eastern religions be taken into consideration. For example, Kőszegi (1992, 211) states that Sufi movements which are very similar to Sufism found in Muslim settings do not qualify as part of the New Age phenomenon. He further contends that most of the Sufi țariqa found in the West “have little to do with the New Age.”
Similarly, Wilson (1998, 180) agrees that Sufism which strongly resembles the traditional forms is of little interest to writers on the New Age phenomenon, even if its leaders and participants are Western. According to Smith (1999, 68-69), the Sufi movements which may be considered associated with the New Age are those with little to no theological basis in Islam. She also suggested that some Sufi movements in the West are a combination of the New Age and traditional Sufism, such as the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia (Smith 1999, 71). This fellowship considers conversion to Islam elective, and it tends to attract those with troubled histories who seek spiritual healing and a supportive community, similar to those attracted to the New Age movement.

As with the “church-sect-NRM” model, the New Age model that is applied indiscriminatingly to all Eastern religions is influenced by a subtle Western-Christian bias. Although it may be useful in its simple approach to religions, it inherently favours Christianity and discounts the presence of other religions in the West. This model would benefit from nuancing, distinguishing between movements that resemble the traditional form and those which have undergone more dynamic changes in the Western setting within the recent past.

Taking these into consideration, I propose a stratified approach. Using Sufism as an example, Sufism that strongly resembles the traditional form should not qualify as a NRM or as part of the New Age. In contrast, the Sufi movements which have acculturated to the Western setting and now differ from traditional Sufism in fundamental ways, for example by not adhering to Islam or by having a democratic structure, may be identified as NRMs since they are novel reinterpretations and reinventions that have emerged in the last century. Among these, the spiritual movements which call themselves Sufism, and may have been inspired by Sufism but differ dramatically from traditional Islamic tariqas, qualify as New Age Sufism. Although many of these have been transient and short-lived, they appear to be more prevalent and sustained in America than in Britain or Europe, and they have significantly impacted the wide-spread, popular notion of Sufism.

For the purpose of this study, Sufism is identified as an alternative religion in America because it is not part of the mainstream religious environment, even among Muslim immigrants. Within Sufism in America, the newer manifestations of Sufism should be considered separate from the traditional Islamic tariqas. However, a desire to avoid making judgments on the authenticity of acculturated Sufi movements, plus the popular notion that Sufism extends beyond the traditional tariqas, prevents me from
making further distinctions. The subsequent pages will introduce the wide variety found within the Sufi movements in America. Over time, Sufism is becoming better established and more well-known, and it may eventually become part of the mainstream or simply continue to enrich the religious setting with both its traditional and less-conventional manifestations.

A brief look into the presence of alternative religions in America shows recurring themes which ebb and flow over time and are shared across numerous movements. These ideas often reflect important shifts in social understandings of the individual and spirituality. For instance, in contrast to the rather dry Puritanism, a social trend was changing the traditional understandings of personal will and submission to God as early as the mid-1700s by introducing love and openness to the Divine as a method for spiritual advancement (Porterfield 2002, 15). A steady fascination among Americans with the occult and an idealised Orient has encouraged the growth of alternative religious movements including Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and Freemasonry (Jenkins 2000, 72-82). The market economy additionally influenced the religious landscape, which has tellingly been described as a “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1999).

For alternative religions which survive the test of time, a natural progression of normalisation takes place. As they become better organised and grow in membership and social status, they tend to conform to acceptable norms and, in turn, be accepted by the mainstream (Jenkins 2000, 17). Two examples are the Baptists in the 1600s and the Methodists in the 1700s. This process and rhetoric stressing the common roots of Judaism and Christianity has resulted in the concept of America being a Judeo-Christian nation. There has been an attempt to also incorporate Islam into the mainstream, as evident by the number of “Abrahamic” interfaith programs which focus on Abraham as a common ancestor of the Jews, Christians, and Muslims. However, including Muslims is a test of the religious pluralism which America professes (Moore 2007). These interfaith bonds may be shown to be untenable during times of a perceived threat, as they were for Muslims in America following September 2001 (Dressler 2009, 77).

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7 New England Protestant pastor Jonathan Edwards’ essays on the psychology of conversion and self-transformation greatly contributed to this movement.
8 Berger (1967) anticipated this in his discussion of secularisation and the resulting “market situation.”
9 For example, see Chautauqua Institution’s youth Abrahamic program: http://www.ciweb.org/religion-youth/ (accessed June 20, 2011).
Islam in America

The presence of Islam in America is unique among Western countries because of its lengthy history. Artefacts, linguistic evidence, and limited records suggest that Islam was in the Americas prior to the 1500s. These earliest interactions are likely due to African immigration and intermarriage with the Native Americans (Van Sertima 2003). There is also evidence that implies a small number of Moors, Muslims who were expelled from Spain following Ferdinand and Isabella’s ordination, travelled to the Caribbean Islands and even as far as the southern tip of Florida (Mroueh 1996). Additionally, at least 15 percent of African slaves brought to America during the Slave Trade are thought to have been Muslim, most of whom lost this identity because of the dehumanising conditions of slavery (Austin 1984, 35).

There are three main factions which have contributed to contemporary Islam in America. These include immigrants who have brought the practice of Islam from their homelands, African Americans who convert (or revert) to Islam, and Sufi movements (Webb 1995a, 234). The arrival of Muslim immigrants can be mapped in five periods. The first wave occurred between 1875 and 1912 and consisted of emigrants from what was then known as Greater Syria (Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon) (Smith 1999, 51). A few early Muslim communities were established in New York City, North Dakota, Michigan, and Iowa.

The second wave of immigration took place after World War I, which also signified the end of the Ottoman Empire. A majority of those who arrived at this time had relatives who were already established in America. Immigration decreased in the early 1920s due to country quotas imposed by U.S. immigration laws (Smith 1999, 52-53). The third wave was limited to family members of Muslims already in America and occurred during the 1930s. The fourth period, which lasted from 1947 to 1960, benefited from slightly relaxed immigration laws, and the Muslims who arrived during this time were mostly from Western Europe, the Middle East, India, Pakistan, Eastern Europe, and Russia. Factors that distinguish this wave from the previous ones include a higher rate of educated professionals from Westernised and urban backgrounds. Many were students seeking educational and professional opportunities. The fifth wave, beginning in 1965, was influenced by both a removal of quotas based on ethnic origin and an increase of turmoil in Muslim countries including Iran, Palestine, South Asia, and the Balkans.
It is not uncommon for Muslims, having come to America for educational opportunities or otherwise, to settle permanently and marry Americans, some of whom embrace Islam. According to the literature, white and black Americans accept Islam for a variety of reasons. Some are attracted by the strong moral standards, the simplicity found in Islamic belief, the intellectual stimulation, the non-racist beliefs, and a welcoming community or sense of belonging (Hermansen 1991, 193; Smith 1999, 65-66).

The first World Parliament of Religions, which was held in Chicago in 1893, served to increase awareness of Eastern religions among Americans. Mostly attended by Hindu and Buddhist guest speakers, Mohammed Russell Alexander Webb was the sole representative of Islam (Eck 2001, 234). He had embraced Islam while serving as America’s consul to the Philippines and was nicknamed “the Yankee Mohammedan” (Abd-Allah 2006, 4). At the conference, he appealed to the openness and fairness of the American people, boldly declaring, “I have faith in the American intellect, in the American intelligence, and in the American love of fair play, and will defy any intelligent man to understand Islam and not like it” (Abd-Allah 2006, 4). Webb’s religious conversion is unique because he was one of the first Americans who did not have ethnic lineage to the Muslims of Africa to embrace Islam and propagate it in the U.S.

Several indigenous movements have emerged among black populations in America which encourage empowerment and a return to the Muslim African heritage (McCloud 1995). Among these, however, there are often significant differences from orthodox Islam. The Moorish Science Temple, founded in 1913 by Noble Drew Ali, and the Nation of Islam, a Black separatist movement that began in the 1930s under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad, were both influential movements (Allen 2000). Under the subsequent leadership of Warith Deen Mohammed, the Nation of Islam has transitioned toward Sunni Islam, although Louis Farrakhan continues to follow Elijah Muhammad’s teachings which diverge from mainstream Islam (Smith 1999, 85-96). The Ahmadiyya movement, which started in India with Mirza Ghulam Ahmed of Qadian, was also popular among the African Americans (Turner 2003).

Due to immigration, marriage, and religious conversion, the estimated number of Muslims in America doubled between 1990 and 2008 (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). However, the estimates of Muslims in America vary dramatically between two million and seven million (Patel 2008, 11). This large difference has been linked to the political situation, as some reports may estimate high or low depending on their political stance toward Islam and problems categorising individuals who do not attend worship services
or decline to specify a religion. Similar to the Pew Landscape Survey (2008, 3), Kosmin and Keysar report that 0.6 percent of the American adult population is Muslim, meaning less than two million. According to the Pew (2008, 44) survey findings, Islam is the most ethnically diverse religion in the U.S. It estimates that over one-third (37 percent) of Muslim Americans are white, nearly one-in-four (24 percent) are black, 20 percent are Asian, 15 percent are other ethnicities, and 4 percent are Latinos.

Although Islamic organisations were not well known before the 1990s, over the last two decades they have become more firmly established in America (Moore 2007, 126). The Council for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) are a few which have provided unity and leadership for the diverse Muslim population, and they have helped to establish a Muslim voice in bureaucratic America. Particularly since September 2001, they have been influential in drawing public attention to the religious inequality in the workplace, prejudice, and hate crimes experienced by Muslims in America. Muslim student associations (MSA) on college campuses also provide support for Muslim students and aid in creating space for discussions on topics important to young Muslims. In addition, the development of a “cosmopolitan vision(s)” by Western-educated Muslim intellectuals who have an appreciation for the rich Islamic heritage have opened the door for Muslims worldwide to productively engage with the West (Kersten 2009, 90; 2011).

Religion in Contemporary America

Regardless of pressures from modernising forces, religion continues to be central to the American experience. The Pew Forum Survey on Religion and Public Life (2008) found that 83 percent of Americans reported a religious affiliation. According to the findings of Kosmin and Keysar (2009), 70 percent of Americans believe in a personal God. Religion remains intricately involved in public life and politics, as was observed in the recent presidential campaigns of George W. Bush and Barak H. Obama, when religious affiliation impacted political party lines, appropriateness of candidates, and financial sponsorship (Foreman 2008).

However, religion in America has undergone dramatic changes. Since the mid-1900s, there has been a noted shift away from the traditional religious monopoly held by

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10 The Pew Survey did not distinguish between European and Arab ethnicity in their “white” ethnic category.
Protestantism. This is a lasting effect of the social upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s connected with the Vietnam War, Civil Rights movement, and Watergate Scandal (Porterfield 2002, 10). Strikingly, according to the Pew Forum (2008), barely 51 percent of the population self-report affiliation in Protestantism, placing it on the verge of becoming a minority religion in the U.S. The study conducted by Kosmin and Keysar (2009) found that between 1990 and 2008, those who identified themselves as Christian decreased by 10 percent, and there was an observed trend of individuals leaving organised religion for an individualised spirituality. Likewise, Alan Wolfe (2003), a professor of political science and director of the Boisi Centre for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, claims that individuals in America are as religious as they have ever been, but the characteristics of that religiosity have altered over time. Instead of yearning for expanded knowledge of doctrine and church history, present-day religious Americans lean toward having a personal experience with a tolerant God.

Religious conversion is an important characteristic of the American religious landscape. According to the survey conducted by the Pew Forum (2008), 44 percent reported either having converted to a religious tradition when previously unaffiliated, moved away from all religious traditions when previously affiliated, or joined a different denomination within a religion. Sociologist and professor of religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Wade Clark Roof (1993, 1999) conducted a landmark study regarding religious affiliation of those born in the particularly large baby-boom generation (after World War II and generally between 1946 and 1964). He found that:

Religious and spiritual themes are surfacing in a rich variety of ways – in Eastern religions, in evangelical and fundamentalist teachings, in mysticism and New Age movements, in Goddess worship and other ancient religious rituals, in the mainline churches and synagogues, in the Twelve-Step recovery groups, in concern about the environment, in holistic health, and in personal and social transformation. (Roof 1993, 4-5)

Although this generation may not largely be attending a church or synagogue as their parents did, they take to heart the American ideal of freedom of choice and have applied it to their religious search. The shifting religious focus toward searching for personal meaning-making and individual experiences of the sacred has led to a “quest culture” (Roof 2001), and the pluralistic religious landscape offers Westerners a variety of options.

11 This particularly large generation of approximately 76 million individuals, creates a bulge in the population (Roof 1993, 1).
The role and importance of religion in U.S. contrasts dramatically with the British experience. In the United Kingdom, the Church of England is the established religion, and the Queen holds the position of Supreme Governor in the Church. Attendance at traditional religious services has declined over the last century, although there has been some disagreement on what this means regarding personal belief. Grace Davie (1994) declared that although individuals may not be attending religious services, religious belief had not decreased a great deal in the U.K. According to the 2001 Census for England and Wales, 76.8 percent of respondents reported having some sort of nominal religious identity. However, Voas (2009) found that there has been a steady decrease in religiosity and importance of religion in regards to age across Europe during the last century. He states that “fuzzy fidelity” or a “casual loyalty” is prevalent in the U.K. instead of personal conviction to a religious tradition. This is supported by the findings of the Pew Forum (2002), which states that only 33 percent of the British considered religion to be “very important” compared to over half of Americans (59 percent). The next section introduces Sufism and its relationship with modernity, followed by a discussion on its presence in America.

Sufism

Sufism is difficult to describe, in part, because it rejects being reduced and categorised. It is as elusive as the scent of a rose to someone who has never experienced it, and it remains difficult to describe for someone who has. Labels such as Islamic mysticism, spirituality, and esoteric Islam provide points of reference, but they are often too broad while at the same time too limited to express Sufism and its associated phenomena throughout history (Chittick 2000, 1). Similar to Rumi’s story in the Mathnawi 12 of the Hindus gathered around an elephant in a dark room, each holding onto a different part of the animal (including its trunk, ear, leg, and back) and assuming that the whole elephant resembles that one part, Sufism is frequently portrayed by an incomplete aspect.

The term Sufism is a misnomer in the sense that words ending with “-ism” indicate philosophies and social movements that have distinct beliefs and qualities, which is inappropriate because Sufism is grounded within Islam (Ernst 1997, 19). “Sufi-ism” was coined in the late eighteenth century by Orientalists to describe an aspect of Muslim

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religious culture that was observed to be very different from the dry, ritualistic adherence to Islam (Ernst 1997, 8-9). They found the Sufis (or Sooffees, as they were referred to at the time) more appealing than the Ottoman Muslims who had earlier threatened to conquer Europe. Literature originating from the Orientalists was often influenced by local informants who held negative and politically biased opinions against the Sufis, encouraging the idea that the Sufis had little, if anything, to do with this religion. In their appreciation of the Sufis, the scholars of that time disregarded the obvious association with the Islamic religion and looked for its origins in Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, and other mystical traditions. In particular, Sir William Jones (d. 1794) and Sir John Malcolm (d. 1833) of the British East India Company propagated it through literary channels as a type of social movement and philosophy that was distinct from the Islamic faith.

The Arabic term taṣawwuf, to which Sufism has become equated, literally means “the process of becoming a Sufi” (Ernst 1997, 21). However, a query into the etymology of “Sufi” provides little insight into what this means. Although there are many poetic and symbolic origins of the word, none have clear linguistic roots to Sufi, nor are they universally accepted by the Sufis themselves. One common proposal is that Sufi comes from wool (ṣūf), which was worn by some early Sufis possibly in resemblance of the austere Christian ascetics or the prophets themselves (Trimingham 1971, 1).

Alternatively, it has been suggested that it may refer to either ṣalā (purity) or the pious and ascetic aškāb as-ṣūfā (companions of the bench), who met in the Medina mosque and reportedly studied esoteric knowledge with the Prophet Muhammad (Knysh 2000, 5). Others, particularly Western scholars, looked to influences outside Islam, including Neo-Platonism, Christian, Indian, and even Chinese (Taoist) sources (Schimmel 1975, 10-11). Insiders, though, disagree with these theories. As al-Hujwiri (1953, 30-31), Persian Sufi and scholar of the eleventh century, states, “The name [Sufi] has no derivation answering to etymological requirements, inasmuch as [it] is too exalted to have any genus from which it might be derived.” Similarly, Shaykh Asaf rejects the above linguistic theories. He suggests that the title of Sufi has mystical significance and was given secretly by the Prophet Muhammad to the spiritual elite in his company only later to become publically known. Historically, Sufi was rarely used in reference to individuals,

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15 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, Washington, DC, Spring 2007.
likely because of the contradiction in the ideal selflessness of a Sufi and the implied egotism of someone who would claim the title for him or herself (Ernst 1997, 26).

Acknowledging the limitations of Orientalist scholarship, more recent scholarship has attempted to find a more balanced understanding of Sufism. Fifty years ago, notable historian of Islamic civilisations, H. A. R. Gibb (1962) suggested that Sufism corresponds with the authentic religious experience in Islam. In this manner, it refers to the inner, spiritual aspect that brings life and spirit to the religion. With it, Islam flourishes and is experienced as real by the practitioners. Without it, adherence to Islam becomes sterile, focussed on external dedication, and lacks sincerity. This is expressed in the poetic and metaphoric style common to Sufi rhetoric: the outer adherence is *shaî'â* (religious law), the inner path is *tarîqa* (the mystical path), and together they will lead the devotee to *haqîqa* (God’s reality). Sometimes an additional aspect is included: by submerging oneself in God’s reality, the devotee will reach *ma’rifâ* (gnosis, inner knowledge) (Fadiman and Frager 1997, 12-13). Symbolically represented, the *shaî‘a* is the shoreline, the *tarîqa* is a boat, the *haqîqa* is an ocean, and the seeker must row from the shore and dive into the ocean to find the pearl of great worth, which is *ma’rifâ*.

To better understand Sufism, William Chittick (2000, 3-4) draws attention to the “Hadith of Gabriel” in which the early Muslims were taught about their religion. According to the tradition, the Archangel Gabriel disguised as a man approached the Prophet Muhammad, who was with a few of his companions, and asked the Prophet three questions: 1) What is *islâm* (submission)? 2) What is faith (*îmân*)? 3) What is *ihsân* (excellence and perfect virtue)? While the first two questions refer to the foundational practices and beliefs of Islam, the third relates to Sufism. The Prophet responded that *ihsân* is to “worship God as if you see Him, for even if you do not see Him, He sees you.” In other words, it means acting with perfect virtue and doing what is beautiful with awareness and certainty in God’s reality. This dimension refers to the realm of the heart. As a famous saying relays, one should strive to purify the self by “polishing the heart” such that it is like a mirror in which the divine essence is reflected (Schimmel 1975, 4). According to this *hadîth*, without *ihsân*, Islam is incomplete.

Another approach to understanding Sufism is to consider it as a prescriptive ethical concept. By the tenth century CE, it was common among Sufi literature to use Sufism to elicit high moral behaviour and spiritual goals among Muslims (Ernst 1997, 20-23). A notable example is found in the writings of Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami (d. 1021), who lived in eastern Iran. He wrote the earliest significant collection of the lives of Sufi
saints in which he historically constructed the Sufis as the disciples and spiritual successors of the prophets. The term Sufi was used in an instructive manner to portray ideals and inspire. A few of the numerous prescriptive sayings, as collected by Qushayri,\(^{16}\) include:

- Sufism is entry into exemplary behaviour and departure from unworthy behaviour.
- Sufism means seizing spiritual realities and giving up on what creatures possess.
- The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame.

Thus, Sufi was rarely used in a descriptive way, but rather in a prescriptive sense to teach and convey psychological and ethical goals.

Sufism receives inspiration directly from Islamic sources, and the revelation of the Qur’an is understood as the model of mystical experience. Chapter 97 of the Qur’an discusses the night as the “Night of Power” in which revelation first “descended” upon the Prophet Muhammad, who was in seclusion on Mount Hira. This experience is referred to by those mystically inclined as the prototype for spiritual experiences. The natural tendency of humanity is to question unexplainable experiences, and thus the Qur’an gives testimony to the truth of its message by confirming in numerous passages that the Prophet was neither relaying a falsehood nor influenced by sickness or delusion. It also continually authenticates its truth throughout history with the unique and powerful effect it has on many who listen to it. Two other extraordinary experiences are critical to mention including the Prophet Muhammad’s night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem and his ascension to nearness to God, which the Qur’an briefly alludes to and a number of ḥadīth expound upon. These special experiences of the Prophet became models for others to experience the divine reality.

The Qur’an is generally recognised for have both clear and metaphorical, or hidden (bāṭin), meanings. There are many mystical themes in the Qur’an from which the Sufis receive inspiration (Ernst 1997, 40-45). Although a more detailed exploration is warranted, they will only by briefly mentioned here. A few of the mystical themes include: God as the creator of both life and death, the closeness that can exist between

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\(^{16}\) In Ernst (1997, 23).
God and humanity, Day of Judgment and the hellfire, primordial covenant that God made with the future offspring of Adam prior to creation, and mystical psychology in regards to controlling the *nafs* (lower-base self). Meditation on the mystical themes and the poetic imagery of the Qur’an may have powerful effects on the devotee and bring about mystical insight.

The collection of *hadith* also serve as a cornerstone for the Sufis’ devotion. By preserving the details of the Prophet’s life, the *hadith* provide guidance regarding exemplary behaviour and insider awareness as to mystical experiences. There are a collection of *hadith* known as *hadith qudsi*, or sacred sayings, in which God speaks in the first person. An example often cited as inspiration for the spiritual journey that suggests a way to know God states, “I was a hidden treasure, and I longed to be known, so I created the world.” In his verses, Shaykh Asaf includes a similar saying, “By My own mercy, I am quietly revealing myself.” Another *hadith qudsi* discusses the relationship that develops between the devotee and God:

> My servant draws near to me through nothing I love more than the religious duty I require of him. And, my servant continues to draw near to me by supererogatory worship until I love him. When I love him, I become the ear by which he hears, the eye by which he sees, the hand by which he grasps, the foot by which he walks. If he asks me for something, I give it to him; if he seeks protection, I provide it to him.

This *hadith qudsi* encourages worshippers beyond the required practices of Islam in order to be drawn near and loved by God. It also speaks of the mystical experience and the new awareness and relationship that develop through devotion.

By the late twelfth century, this devotional movement had become well known and widespread (Trimingham 1971). Sufi teachers (*shaykh*, also called *murshid* or *pir*) were forming followings of students (*murīds*), and Sufism became institutionalised into orders (*tarīqa*). There are twelve main *tarīqa* that are generally recognised and many smaller branches that have developed over the centuries. Each of the main *tarīqa* was founded by a different *shaykh* (literally, “elder”). Although they may vary in practices,
each tariqa represents a complete spiritual path. As in Islam, there is no leading authority in Sufism except the Qur’an and tradition of Prophet Muhammad. The tariqas have spiritual lineages (silsila) which are meant to assure the spiritual legitimacy of its present shaykh by documenting succession back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad.


Joining a tariqa involves giving allegiance (bay’ah) to a shaykh, which is traditionally considered to be an unbreakable covenant between the initiate and God. This is also called “taking intisâb.” Thereafter, the initiate is called a murîd (literally, “one who is willing”). The prototype of this relationship is found in the Qur’an (18: 60-82) when Moses spent time with Khidr. Connecting with a shaykh is often cited as critical to making spiritual progress because of the guidance and protection this unique relationship offers. As Shaykh Ragip Robert Frager (1997, 5) of the Jerrahi Tariqa states, “You cannot teach yourself Sufism or develop spiritually by yourself any more than you can become a doctor or an engineer by yourself.” The shaykh acts as a mirror for the murîd and guides him or her through a process of unveiling (kashf) through inner purification and struggle against the ego (tazkiyat al-nafs). As Jean-Louis Michon (1987, 272) adds, “The true master is, of course, one who has himself already traversed the path, who knows its route, its pitfalls, and its dangers, so that he can guide others.” The student progresses through stations (maqâm) and states (hâh), which are discussed further in Chapter Five. The stations are traversed largely through personal effort, while the states are considered to be purely gifts from God. Reliance on the shaykh ideally lessens over time as the relationship with God develops, until any attachment to the shaykh is recognised as unnecessary and disappears.

Traversing the Sufi path involves undergoing a powerful process of inner transformation. The goal of the Sufi is to become fully submitted to God, “dying” to the self (fanâ’) and coming into “union” with God (wahdat al-wujûd) (Chittick 2000, 16). At this point, human perfection and the divine image in which humans were created are

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21 Wahdat al-wujûd is contentious and not universally shared among Sufis.
actualised, and the hitherto constraints that bound the individual are released. Thereafter, the Sufi lives with certainty of the divine truth.

The enormity of the unveiling experience has inspired seemingly blasphemous statements and writings. For example, Mansur al-Hallaj famously stated, “Ana’ al-Haqq” (I am the Truth) (i.e. God). This utterance gave Hallaj the title of “martyr of mystical love” by the Sufis, who realised that he had removed the false gods in his life and reached awareness of his unity with God (Sells 1996, 22-23). However, among the more orthodox Muslims, it was considered heretical and was one among many political and theological factors which led to his execution in 913 CE (Din Attar 1976, 264). Another example of a Sufi martyr includes Shaykh Bayzid Bastami with his apparent pronouncement, “Laysa jubbetu sive Allah” (In my garment there is nothing but God). Also, Ibn al-Arabi, who is known as the Greatest Shaykh (Shaykh al-Akbar), reportedly declared to a congregation in Damascus that the God they prayed to was under his feet, after which he was killed and buried in an unmarked grave in the garbage dump. It was not until much later when Emperor Selim ordered that his body be recovered that the shaykhs’ secret was revealed: gold was found at the feet of Ibn al-Arabi’s grave. In addition, it is not uncommon for Sufi inspired poetry to include references to alcoholic drink, lovemaking, and other themes considered blasphemous and inappropriate by the religious establishment. For instance, Rumi (1996) is known for writing beautiful verses in which he likens wine to divine love and drunkenness to becoming overwhelmed by divine love. As Wilson (1998, 201) comments, “It is Sufism (arguably) more than any other brand of mysticism which has embodied the idea that ‘intoxication’ may take many, sometimes outlandish and unexpected, forms.”

Travelling Sufis have played an important role in spreading Islam across the world. They are recorded as establishing Sufi lodges (khānaqāhs) in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, Spain, the Balkans, Egypt, and Iraq, among other locations (Schimmel 1975; Fazl ‘Izzati 1978; Levtzion 1979). Travel is considered a physical and spiritual challenge for overcoming one’s nafs, or lower-base ego, and is thus an essential part of spiritual development (Ernst 1997, 138-141). Although some Sufis have been documented as spreading Islam through violence, as Eaton (2008) explores in his study of Sufis in Bijapur, India, more often the reason individuals embrace Islam through Sufism is the ease with which Sufis adapt to local cultures and popularise Islam.

Sufism and Modernity

Many scholars and modernist thinkers, both inside and outside of Islam, anticipated that the practice of Sufism would cease in time. This was because they considered Sufism to be a remnant of archaic traditions, and its elements were thought to be inconsistent with the desirable qualities of rational, modern individuals (Ernst 1997, 199-202). In particular, they targeted its portrayal as a way to pursue esoteric understandings of God and the requirement for adherents to concede personal judgment, defer to the teacher, and take a vow of secrecy. As van Bruinessen and Howell (2007, 7) comment: “These features attributed to the ṭariqa have been deemed not only to violate basic religious doctrine, but to be inappropriate to the personal autonomy proper to the modern subject.”

Adding to this belief and encouraging the assumption that it was, indeed, in decline, the influence of Sufism on various levels of societies and its capacity to adapt was typically disregarded in the literature. A lasting effect of many Orientalists having been influenced by Islamic reform movements which were critical of Sufism was that their observations were limited in scope (Geaves 2000, 2-3; Ernst 1997, 8-18). They primarily document the “popular” and often unorthodox expressions of Sufism common to rural areas while neglecting the Sufi tradition of urban, educated elite. Their writings typically approach Sufism as moribund and describe its origins, rise, influence, and subsequent decline (Arberry 1969; Baldick 1989).

Although incorrect, this influenced other academics, and it severely stunted the study of traditional Sufism in contemporary societies. For example, from his observations in Egypt and the Arab Middle East, A. J. Arberry (1969, 122) famously commented that although the Sufis held “the interest and allegiance of the ignorant masses, no man of education would care to speak in their favour.” This sentiment was reiterated by both Clifford Geertz (1960) in his study of Islam in Java and by Ernest Gellner (1981), who commented that a more puritan reformist form of Islam was overtaking the mystical and scholarly traditionalism he termed “maraboutism.” This helped to reinforce the idea that Sufism, as espoused in living ṭariqas and the writings of Ibn al-Arabi and al-Ghazali, was becoming extinct, a false opinion which ignored that “many Sufis operate in both domains without appearing to perceive a contradiction” (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007, 9).
Recent scholarship has highlighted the contradiction between the assumptions in the literature and the reality of the ṭariqa, which are adapting to modernity and often gaining members. Numerous examples could be mentioned. In Egypt, for instance, although it was surmised that the influence of ṭariqa had weakened (Gilsenan 1973), Valerie Hoffman (1995) found that there were increasing numbers of ṭariqa as well as increasing membership within the ṭariqa. She particularly notes that the ṭariqa were seeking young, well-educated and modernist-minded individuals who especially appreciated a sha‘i-oriented approach in Sufism. Also, while Sufism was largely ignored in Indonesia since the 1970s out of a preference for the study of the outer, scripturalist form of Islamic revival movements, Julia Day Howell (2001, 702-703) has shown how Sufism is being “enthusiastically pursued” by both men and women in the urban as well as rural areas. She associates this trend with changes made by the ṭariqa such as experimenting with new institutional forms attempting to bridge the traditional expressions of Islam with the modern scripturalism. Other examples include Fethullah Gülen and Said Nursi’s followings in Turkey, intellectual groups centred on Sufism that draw individuals from the middle class including the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society or the Rumi Forum, and the vast adaptations of Islamic Sufism to include non-Muslims such as observed at the Dances of Universal Peace.

Sufism has received criticism over the centuries because of general deterioration and introducing innovations. It has undergone numerous reforms, often heralded by those within Sufi orders. In her notable work entitled Sufis and Anti-Sufis, Elizabeth Sirriyeh (1999) discusses many of these reform movements. Two prominent reformers within Sufism in the 1700s and early 1800s were Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi and Ahmad Ibn Idries of Morocco, who championed for a reorientation toward sha‘i and away from the decay represented in shrine worship, public performances, and superstitious practices (Sirriyeh 1999, 4-11). Other than among the Wahhabi movement, it is uncharacteristic for reformists to forthright reject Sufism because divine intervention through mystical experiences is a common Islamic belief. De Jong and Radtke (1999) present an overview of the controversies spanning six geographical locations and 13 centuries in their edited book.

A phrase which arose from Sufism’s interaction with reformers and Western colonialism is “neo-Sufism,” and it has been used to delineate an expression of modern

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23 The Wahhabi Movement was founded by Muhammad b. Abd al-Wahhab in Arabia in the 1700s. See Oliveti (2002) for more on the Wahhabis.
Sufism. However, scholars have used this term inconsistently and with varying meanings (O’Fahey and Radtke 2008). Fazlur Rahman apparently coined “neo-Sufism” in 1966 to describe changes in Sufism that became prominent in the late 1800s and early 1900s. It was characterised by strong adherence to the *ṣaḥīḥ* and *ṣunna*, rejection of *bīdʿa* and ecstatic practices, and had jihadist-tendencies. Other times, this term has been used to refer to a contemporary expression of Sufism which emerged from critiques of excesses from within and which promotes adherence to *ṣaḥīḥ* (Weismann 2000). Additionally, Day Howell (2001, 712) uses “neo-Sufism” to identify a type of Sufi-oriented Islam which is ethical and devotional, but lacks the institutional tradition of the Sufi *ṭariqa*, and was instigated by, as she describes, “Neo-Modernist liberalism.” A further expression is discussed by Hammer (2004, 139) as a form of Sufism which is acculturated strongly to Western ideals, for example the Sufism espoused by Frithjof Schuon. However, O’Fahey and Radtke (2008) point out that the characteristics typically ascribed to neo-Sufis do not accurately describe their origins, actions, or beliefs, and they recommend employing “neo-Sufism” cautiously.

Sufism in America

Until the 20th century, most Americans were unaware of Sufism except for the few intellectuals who knew of its occurrence in Muslim settings. Sufi practices were not typically adopted by Americans, nor were Sufi texts read and integrated into local religious practices, unlike the Buddhist and Hindu texts which were applied by the American Transcendentalists, for example (Hammer 2004, 129). When Sufism was introduced in the early 1900s by the writings of Idries Shah, European Perennialist Sufis, and Inayat Khan, a travelling Indian Sufi teacher, it became widely understood as a spirituality which overarched the main religious traditions and was not strongly connected to Islam. These teachers and writers found an eager following, particularly among those interested in the occult and Eastern truths.

This interpretation of Sufism as a perennial-oriented movement remained dominant for about 50 years until more flexible immigration laws in second half of the twentieth century allowed a greater number of Muslim Sufis to migrate to America. Prior to this, Muslim immigrants had not played a large role in promoting Sufism in America,

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24 The term “neo-Sufism” was in existence in the time of Ahmed Sirhindi (d. 1624), an Islamic scholar and reformer from the Punjab.
unlike those in Britain and across Europe. This is likely because most Muslim immigrants to America have been highly-educated and modernist-minded, usually looking disfavourably upon the popular Sufism of their homelands (Hermansen 2004, 42). Sufism was often discounted as being steeped in superstition and inspired by bid’ā (innovation), equating it to an illegal activity in Islam. As a result, Sufi connections are downplayed by the majority of Muslims in America (Hermansen 2004, 42, 62). When immigration laws relaxed in the 1960s, a greater number of Muslims who practiced Sufism immigrated to America, including Sufi shaykhs. They began promoting it in more traditional, Islamic forms, although many of them adapted Sufism in some ways to the American context, often including a gradual introduction into the tenets of Islam. A number of Americans who were initially interested in the more perennial-oriented Sufism moved toward more Islamic Sufism during this time (Webb 2006, 89).

As a result of these beginnings, the concept of Sufism has been stretched to describe many variants beside the traditional form of tariqas in America. In general, Sufi movements tend to be world-accommodating of mainstream American culture since no dramatic changes are usually required, such as adopting different names or foreign dress codes (Hermansen 2000). On the other hand, some Sufi movements may be distrustful of Western society or espouse millennial philosophies. Those with participants who are ethnically-unified, recent immigrants have often acculturated minimally to the American setting and continue to uphold the cultures and traditions of their homelands. Still, other Sufi movements are Traditionalist in the sense that they consider the modern West to be in crisis as a result of losing touch with tradition, as René Guénon proposed. Also, they may uphold a Perennial philosophy, considering Sufism to be a pathway to a primal truth and primordial religion (Sedgwick 2004, 21-23).

Typically, Sufism attracts Westerners through creative expressions such as poetry, Sufi stories, music, and dancing (Hermansen 1998; Smith 1999, 69). It provides an outlet for those seeking spiritual fulfilment (Jawad 2006, 160; Weismann 2007b, 167). Köse (1996, 147), in his study of converts to Islam in Great Britain, found that many who joined Sufism reported feeling dissatisfied with their former religions and wanting to have meaningful interactions with the Divine. Western women, in particular, may be attracted to Sufism as an alternative to religious traditions historically dominated by men and that have an institutional aversion of the feminine (Jawad 2006, 157; Smith 1999, 72). The literature also indicates that joining Sufism can 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). Another strong draw is the allowance for intellectual spiritual discourse and artistic expressions (Hermansen 2004, 42).

While Sufism has found wide appeal among Americans, it apparently has not played a significant role in converting many to Islam, contrary to its reported role in Europe (Smith 1999, 69). As Hermansen (2000) states, “The appeal of Sufism to Americans usually occurs before formal acceptance of Islam, and many persons involved in Sufi movements never come to formally practice Islam.” This is likely because Islam is often considered foreign and unappealing by Americans whether this is due to negative portrayals in the media, stereotypes of it being dogmatic and dry, the fear of fanaticism, or lack of personal interaction with Muslims on a regular basis. The universal spirituality in Sufism, which is common to perennialism, has attracted spiritual seekers, many of whom applied the appealing aspects of Sufism to their individual spiritual searches, such as Sufi psychology and meditation techniques, and disregarded the less appealing dimensions, particularly its connection to Islam. Interestingly, these new manifestations resemble the early concept of Sufism by Orientalists. As Ernst (1997, 9) explains, “The essential feature of the definitions of Sufism that appeared [at the end of the eighteenth century] was the insistence that Sufism had no intrinsic relation with the faith of Islam” but that it had “more in common ... with true Christianity, with Greek philosophy, and with the mystical speculations of the Indian Vedanta.” Their misconstruction has become an observed reality, particularly among the NRMs and New Age movements in America.

On the other hand, a review of the biographies of prominent American converts to Islam demonstrates that Sufism does influence conversion to Islam in the U.S. Among these well known Muslim converts are: Hamza Yusuf, Omar Faruq Abdallah, Nuh Keller, Vincent Daniel Moore, Nurdeen Durkee, and Aisha Bewley. Sufism continues to play a role in their lives as scholars, authors, and leaders in their Islamic communities. This shows that Sufism has more than a secondary role for some in their decisions to embrace Islam.

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25 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.”
26 Dutton (1999, 163) declares that Sufism “is still one of the main points of entry into Islam for Europeans.”
27 Many small towns in America have limited ethnic and religious diversity. For example, in the town where I grew up in Western New York, there are no Muslims.
A Historical Glimpse

According to Gisela Webb (2006, 87), professor of religious studies at Seton Hall University in New Jersey, there are three distinguishable waves of Sufism in America. Although these phases of Sufi activity are identifiable, they are intertwined and may have vague borders with actors who contributed significantly to more than one wave. In this discussion on America, several Europeans should also be included for their contributions to spreading Sufism throughout the West.

The first wave occurred in the early 1900s and was marked by increased interest among Westerners in Eastern knowledge and, likewise, a desire on behalf of Eastern teachers to bring renewed spiritual awareness to the West. The first Western “Sufi” to become known was Isabelle Eberhardt, an audacious Swiss woman who travelled though Algeria in the late 1800s and early 1900s and published popular and romantic accounts of her experiences in the French newspapers (Sedgwick 2003). She was known for dressing in men’s clothing, smoking hashish, and for her romantic endeavours. She referred to herself as a Sufi, giving Westerners a very unorthodox perception of Sufism.

A European who played an important pioneering role in kindling interest in esoteric and theosophical Sufism in the West was Georgii Gurdjieff, of Greek-Armenian descent born in Transcaucasia (Westerlund 2004, 20). After coming into contact with Sufism during travels through the Middle East and Central Asia, he travelled to major cities in Europe and America, including Paris, London, and New York, and gave performances with Mevlevi-inspired dance and music. Gurdjieff became quite well known among intellectual circles in the West.

Most recognised for his role in establishing Sufism in America as a universal spirituality during the early 1900s is Inayat Khan, an Indian mystic and musician. Having studied under a Hindu teacher as well as a Muslim Sufi shaykh of the Chisti Tariqa (Nizami branch), Khan was uniquely prepared to teach to the diverse American population (Smith 1999, 69). He considered Americans unprepared to achieve mystical self-realisation through traditional Islamic Sufism (Jironet 2009, 20; Khan 1979, 133). In an attempt to share the message of Sufism in a method which was better adapted to the Western mind, Khan separated Sufism from its historical and traditional place in Islam and emphasised the spiritual essence of Truth in all religions. He toured the continent

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28 Other significant changes were also implemented based on Western culture, such as a democratic system of leadership (Jironet 2009, 21). Inayat Khan found that his students in the West were unprepared for the traditional murid-shaykh relationship.
between 1910 and 1927, hosting lectures and workshops on Sufism as a universal path to spiritual transformation and self-realisation.\textsuperscript{29}

Among the noteworthy Europeans is René Guénon, philosopher and founder of the French journal \textit{La Gnose} (Gnosis), who was initiated into Sufism by Swedish painter Ivan Aguéli (d. 1917), \textit{shaykh} of the Shadhili Tariqa (Westerlund 2004, 21). Differing from Gurdjieff and Khan’s interpretation of Sufism, Guénon is famous for establishing the philosophy of Traditionalism, which is centred on the concept of a primordial religious tradition (Perennialism) that has since been lost to humanity (Sedgwick 2003). It was thought that Western civilisation was declining and would continue to do so unless Western individuals reconnected with the primal truths found in Eastern traditions. The Sufi path was identified as being a valuable way of reaching these ancient wisdoms (Hammer 2004, 132). At that time, there was a burgeoning interested in Europe in the writings of Ibn al-Arabi, and Guénon introduced many Westerners to Sufism through his publications.

Most famously, Guénon’s writings influenced Swiss francophone Frithjof Schuon, who travelled to Algeria in 1932 and was initiated as a \textit{shaykh}. He founded a Swiss branch of the Alawi Tariqa that was barely known to outsiders because of its secrecy. This \textit{tariqa} became established in France, England, and America, particularly among the intellectual elite (Sedgwick 2003). Schuon espoused Traditionalism, and with time distanced his order from Islam. Later, this order underwent further changes, which will be mentioned below.

The second wave of Sufism found fertile ground in the American counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s (Webb 2006, 88). Having identified the cause of disharmony and racism as a spiritual sickness that the established religious culture had neglected to correct and had even encouraged, those involved in the counterculture movement were willing to experiment with a variety of alternatives. Interest in mysticism was rekindled, academic departments of comparative religious studies began emerging, and traditions were often blended together during this time of experimentation and renewed interest in Eastern knowledge. Both perennial-oriented Sufism and traditional, Islamic Sufism, in addition to numerous Sufi-inspired movements and organisations emerged during this wave.

The perennial-oriented Sufism and Sufi-inspired movements flourished among those who were seeking traditional and Eastern wisdoms but had little regard for their

\textsuperscript{29} Inayat Khan’s original Sufi Movement split in the 1960s, when his son Vilayat Khan became involved in the leadership and formed the Sufi Order in the West (Geaves 2004, 142). It is estimated that there were nearly 100 centres for the Sufi Order in the West in America at the end of the millennium (Eck 2001, 265).
historical or traditional foundations. For example, the American Sufi dancing movement was inspired by American Sufi Samuel Lewis (d. 1971), who was associated with Inayat Khan’s Sufi order (Hermansen 2000). Although the dances are reportedly based on traditional practices, its contemporary form resembles folk dancing which incorporates meditative chants from Hinduism, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

Another example involves Frithjof Schuon, who moved to America in the 1970s and established a centre in Bloomington, Indiana. Following several visions of the Virgin Mary in which he reportedly received teachings, he changed his order from the Alawi to the Maryami. Schuon’s approach to Sufism was Traditionalist and had anti-modern elements. He mingled Islam with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Native American traditions, and the practices of the order have, at times, involved ritual nudity (Hammer 2004, 132-133). This order gained legitimacy when Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Iranian-American professor of Islamic philosophy at George Washington University, joined and later succeeded Schuon. Other notable scholars associated with this order include Martin Lings, Titu Burckhardt, Victor Danner, and William Stoddart (Hermansen 2000).

Idries Shah played an important role in spreading Sufism as a perennial-oriented philosophy during this time. Born in England of Afghani and Scottish descent, he was also influenced by the writings of Gurdjieff (Westerlund 2004, 21). Idries Shah was a prolific writer and his works include tales of Sufi Eastern wisdom and parables which are tailored to a Western audience, using terminology that does not associate Sufism with Islam (Smith 1999, 70). His deputy in America was psychology professor Robert Ornstein, who merged Sufi concepts with psychology (Hermansen 2004, 53).

Cultivating consciousness and psychological approaches to personal healing and spiritual growth, particularly humanistic and transpersonal psychology, increased in popularity in parallel to the perennial-oriented Sufi movements during this era (Hermansen 2004, 48). This was especially the case in the San Francisco Bay area in California. Sufi spiritualities inspired holistic therapeutic techniques as well as were used alongside them, including Jungian psychology, transpersonal psychologies (i.e. Ken Wilbur, Robert Ornstein, etc.), and ‘soul’ (nafs) psychologies (i.e. James Hillman and Thomas Moore). Adapting to the culture of the time, Inayat Khan’s son Vilayat Khan rejuvenated the Sufi Order during the 1960s by incorporating holistic healing, New Age spirituality, and humanistic sciences.30

30 It is estimated that there were nearly 100 centres for the Sufi Order in the West in America at the end of the millennium (Eck 2001, 265).
In addition, a number of traditional forms of Sufism were brought to America during this second wave. With more relaxed immigration laws instigated in 1965, an increased number of shaykhs and Muslim immigrants brought Islamic Sufism to America. These shaykhs were “more committed to stressing the continuity of Sufism with Islam” than those who came to America during the first wave (Webb 1994, 70-71). It was during this time that Shaykh Asaf arrived in North America from the former Yugoslavia. Many others could be mentioned in addition to the following Sufi teachers. Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak (d. 1986), from Istanbul, Turkey, brought the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa to America (Hermansen 2000). Its main location is in the New York City area where Tosun Bayrak and Shaykh Nur Hixon (d. 1995) have been representatives, although there are several other locations including in the San Francisco Bay area and Spring Valley, N.Y. Javad Nurbakhsh, an Iranian professor of psychiatry, established the Nimatullahi Tariqa in San Francisco, California. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (d. 1986), a Singhalese shaykh of the Qadiri Tariqa, came to America upon the request of a university student and founded a Sufi community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Smith 1999, 72).

One of the most wide-spread and well-known Sufi orders in America is the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa, headed by Shaykh Nazim al-Kibrisi (b. 1922). A number of Americans and Europeans have been initiated into the order since the late 1970s, and it has active centres in San Francisco, California; Chicago, Illinois; and Montreal, Canada (Hermansen 2000). Shaykh Hisham Kabbani, Shaykh Nazim’s representative and successor in America, settled in America in the early 1990s, which places him in the next wave.

The third wave of Sufism in America is recognised by action taken by the Sufi movements regarding issues of existence beyond the first generation and also by increased involvement in political and international arenas (Webb 2006, 90). It often involves an element of ethnicity as tariqas become established in America and American-born leaders become initiated. Continuing the discussion on the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa, Shaykh Hisham’s transition to California in 1991 indicates that there was a need to establish leadership in America for the local murids. His presence has helped to increase the tariqa’s membership and hopefully will assure smooth succession. In addition, Shaykh Hisham has worked hard to become a guiding presence among the Muslims and has connected with national political figures. He has assisted in establishing several organisations affiliated to the tariqa that have educational, gender, and political orientations including the Islamic Supreme Council of America, Kamilat Muslim...
Women’s Organisation, and the As-Sunna Foundation of America (Damrel 2006, 118-120). In 1999, he met with President Clinton and the U.S. State Department and expressed that Islamic “extremism” had spread throughout 80 percent of the Muslims in America.

Other examples of political activity among the ṭariqas include the following. Bawa Muhaiyaddeen wrote a letter to the Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iranian hostage situation (Webb 2006, 94). Also, Shaykh Asaf testified in the capacity of a professor of nuclear medicine before the U.S. Congress, British Ministry of Defence, European Parliament, and both Houses of Parliament of Japan by presenting scientific results concerning the effects of radioactive and nuclear battlefields on both military and civilian populations. His efforts earned him the Nuclear Free World International Peace Prize in 2004. The third wave will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

Diverse Manifestations of Sufism in America

Olav Hammer (2004, 127) observes that Westerners tend to be highly individualistic, in search of quick returns, and generally “coddled,” which impacts their religious searches. For Sufism to survive in the highly competitive religious environment, it has been adapted to the cultural context, in various degrees. As a result, Sufism in America refers to an assortment of movements which represent a much more expansive view of relating to the Divine than strictly through the Islamic tradition.

Scholars have suggested various typologies to make sense of the conglomeration of movements which refer to themselves as Sufism. However, difficulty arises because of several factors. First, the dynamic nature of a living esoteric tradition defies fixed definitions. Labelling a community inadvertently places it in a timeless and changeless void that does not acknowledge natural developments, and time is a crucial factor for movements which engage in a process of acculturation. For example, while conversion to Islam is now required of the Alami murīds, during the very early stages of establishing the Alami Tariqa in North America, the outward form of Islam was downplayed, and the focus was on the inner meanings of service and submission. Second, since categorisation often involves evaluations based on certain criteria, it often inadvertently reflects personal values and emotions, and this can have residual impacts on scholarship and the identity of the movements (Hermansen 2000; Schönbeck 2009). A third complexity has to do with hermeneutics. Clarity is sometimes difficult to achieve with typologies since words have
pre-established and sometimes divergent connotations. Regardless of these potential deficiencies, typologies are often useful because they offer simplified ways to look at complex phenomenon.

One method of classification of Sufism in America is to organise the movements based on their tariqa affiliations. This method establishes Islamic legitimacy through links to succession of the silsila and is instructive by chronicling the historical and traditional foundation. However, it does not fit well with Sufi movements which are not associated with the customary Muslim tariqas, and it conveys minimal information about time-relative practices and beliefs. Also, the clarity of this method is confused by developments which result from the interaction and merging of various tariqas and the acculturation with cultural particularities. Hermansen (2000) demonstrates these complexities in her study of hybrid identity formations among the Sufi movements. In the article, she documents 13 major tariqa lineages and 34 Sufi movements in America and several in Canada. Regardless of the disadvantages of this approach, it is favoured in many instances.

Another method for categorising Sufi movements is to organise them according to their religious orientation and internal features. Hermansen’s (1998; 2006a) garden metaphor distinguishes Sufi movements based on their orientation to Islam and level of acculturation while including an underlying ethnic element. The typology consists of: 1) Hybrids, 2) Perennials, and 3) Transplants. These names match the defining characteristics of their horticultural counterparts. Hybrids refer to Sufi movements which are oriented towards Islam, but have accommodated to certain aspects of the Western culture. These Sufi orders combine Islamic spirituality with esoteric teaching examples that are familiar to Americans. The Alami Tariqa and the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa are two examples. Due to the affiliation with Islam, these movements are typically led by Muslim immigrants, especially when becoming established in the Western setting, and often consist of a mixture of immigrant and non-immigrant members.

The second category is perennials, which emphasise the universal spirituality that transcends Islam. Hermansen encountered criticism concerning this category because of the hermeneutic association with the Perennialist philosophy as espoused by René

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31 Hermansen’s (2000) overview notes Shaykh Asaf’s establishment of the Rifai’i Tariqa in Toronto, Canada, and his subsequent move to the U.S. Shaykh Asaf introduced the Rifai’i Tariqa in Toronto prior to the establishment of the Sufi community in Waterport, N.Y. The name of the tariqa was changed from Rifai’i to Alami in the early 1990s.

32 Andrew Rawlinson (1997), in The Book of Enlightened Masters, writes about Westerners becoming initiated as spiritual masters in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism.
Guénon and later Frithjof Schuon. Explaining this category further in a subsequent article (Hermansen 2000), she clarified that it was intended to include both those who welcome any religious tradition as a valid spiritual path and those who mingle elements from various religious traditions based on a universal spiritual connection to the one source of Truth. Membership tends to be mostly non-immigrant Westerners. An example is the Golden Sufi Centre, formed in California by Vaughan-Lee based on the teachings of Irina Tweedie, whose Sufi teacher was a practicing Hindu in the Naqshbandi-Mujadidi Tariqa (Vaughan-Lee n.d.).

The third category, transplants, refers to small groups of ethnic Muslim immigrants who practice the traditional Sufism of their homelands and have chosen not to adapt a great deal to the new context (2006, 29). These Sufi communities resist accommodation to American culture. An example is the Bektashi Tariqa, established in 1953 in Detroit, Michigan (Trix 1994). This community has strong links to the Albanian population at Lake Prespa in Macedonia. Trix discusses some of the difficulties encountered by this community, including the tendency to view individuals of non-Albanian origin as a threat, particularly in reference to marriage. They struggle against the deterioration of their culture and traditions. This category is limited in applicability because of the natural process of acculturation over time to the local setting, and it is unclear at which point a transplant movement becomes a hybrid.

An alternative typology is proposed by Alan Godlas, associate professor of religion at the University of Georgia, on his website on Sufism in the West. Similarly to Hermansen, he considers religious orientation to be important and notes various levels of dedication to Islam. In contrast, though, he disregards ethnicity and instead includes a category for non-traditional Sufi movements which are based on an element of Sufism. As listed on Godlas’ website, the categories include: 1) Islamic Sufi Orders of the West, 2) Quasi-Islamic Sufi Organisations or Orders, 3) Non-Islamic Sufi Organisations or Orders, and 4) Organisations or Schools Related to Sufism or Sufi Orders. This classification brings to attention groups which draw their inspiration from an aspect of Sufism, but are not Sufi orders. Two examples are the Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society, formed to promote the writings of Ibn ‘Arabi, and the Naqshbandi Foundation for Islamic Education (NFIE), which unites academics with practicing Sufis. Ethnically-homogeneous, traditional Sufi tariqas fit easily into the first category with those of mixed

ethnicity which ascribe to Islam. One difficulty with this typology is its limited temporal dimension. As discussed previously, Islam allows for a gradual process of Islamisation. Therefore many Sufi movements which began as “Quasi-Islamic Sufi organisations” may be changing toward “Islamic Sufi Orders,” as the Alami Tariqa did in the late 1970s, but this is not easily demonstrated using this typology.

Sharing elements from both Godlas and Hermansen’s categories while adding another aspect, Ron Geaves (2000, 72) presents a typology drawn from his research in Britain. Uniquely, Geaves includes a category for Muslims who are not formal members of a tariqa or Sufi organisation. His typology consists of: 1) Muslims who have an inclination toward the Ahlel as-Sunnat wa Jamaat, but are not murīds in a tariqa. This accounts for numerous Muslims, especially those in ethnic communities, who hold moderate, spiritual beliefs and may consult a shaykh periodically, but are not involved in the institutional form of Sufism. It represents a cultural practice of Sufism. The other categories are: 2) mostly ethnically-homogenous tariqas which adhere to sha'ī law, 3) ethnically-diverse tariqas which adhere to sha'ī law, and 4) “universal Sufism” which does not require adherence to sha'ī law. Reflecting the qualities of Sufism in the U.K., Geaves’ typology has a strong focus on ethnicity and traditional tariqas. It does not elaborate on Sufi movements that are not tariqas and the variations among those which do not follow sha'ī.

From Hermansen, Godlas, and Geaves’ typologies, it is apparent that Sufi movements in the West vary regarding four components: 1) orientation to Islam, 2) ethnic composition, 3) acculturation to the Western setting, and 4) organisational components. Their religious orientation ranges on a scale between strongly adhering to Islam and borrowing elements from a number of religions. The membership varies from ethnically heterogeneous to homogeneous. Sufi movements have acculturated in differing levels to the Western setting, with some preferring to retain as much of their traditional customs as possible and others dramatically changing to fit the environment. The organisational components also vary with some being traditional tariqas, others being New Age movements or associations, and still others having no institutional form beyond a fluid cultural practice of certain elements of Sufism. There are many degrees within these four elements, and flexibility within this allows for changes over time.
Characteristics of Sufism in America

Regardless of the cultural interactions and sharing of ideas which take place and inevitable shared elements between Sufism in Western settings, there are features of Sufism in America which make it distinct from Sufism in the European environment. While Sufism in Western countries exists on a continuum between the traditional, Islamic institution of tariqas and universal expressions of Sufi spirituality, it appears that there are a greater number of non-traditional variations of Sufism in America than in Europe. Employing the language of Hermansen (2006a), there are more hybrid and perennial Sufi movements in America than transplants. In contrast, in Britain, there are more transplant Sufi tariqas and fewer which creatively merge Sufism with Western culture, other than those that separate it from Islam. This is observable in British Professor Ron Geaves’ (2000) typology, which groups all of the non-Islamic Sufi movements into one category while elaborating on Islamic Sufism in relation to ethnicity in three other categories. This can be compared to American Professor Godlas’ (n.d.) typology, which presents three categories of non-Islamic or partially Islamic Sufi movements and only one Islamic. The focus of one scholar on ethnicity within Islamic Sufism and the other to various hybridised cultural expressions is suggestive of recognisable differences between Sufism in Britain and America.

Hermansen (2000) discusses two areas in which she observes Sufism participating in the “intersection” of Muslim and American cultures to create something which may be considered uniquely American. The first is the “sphere of translation,” which includes publications, the arts, and performance. She found that the Islamic Sufi movements usually publish translations and commentaries on traditional texts, whereas the perennial-oriented Sufis tend to produce inspirational teaching stories, quest novels, and books on psychology, particularly psychological approaches to personal growth and healing (Hermansen 2000; 2004, 47). For example, Coleman Barks is well-known for his translations of Rumi’s thirteenth-century Sufi poetry (Naim 2005).

Americans, it has been suggested, are particularly fond of public performances, which influences Sufism in America to be different from the more “sober” Sufism typically found in Europe (Hermansen 2004, 45). Sufi and American identities have been integrated particularly through creative expressions such as music and dance. Sonneborn (1995), in his study of dhikr performance at the Sami Mahal Sufi Centre in California, concludes that the music is “distinctively American” while remaining true to the essential
elements of Islamic Sufism. The performances of the Dances of Universal Peace,\textsuperscript{37} provides another example of this meeting point. This movement was inspired by American Sufi teacher Samuel Lewis of the Chishti Tariqa.

The second area of intersection of Sufism and Americanism, according to Hermansen (2000), is the “sphere of institutions.” Sufis have established numerous centres across the American continent, including mosques.\textsuperscript{38} In an attempt to create sacred space in America, places called \textit{maqāms} have been dedicated to a Sufi \textit{shaykh} or \textit{wali} (saint, friend of God) and are considered to contain the \textit{baraka} (spiritual blessings) of that person even if he or she never visited it. An example is the building at the Haqqani Da’wa Centre in Michigan, which is dedicated to Shaykh Abdullah al-Faizi al-Daghestani, Shaykh Nazim’s teacher. The practice of establishing tomb shrines for pilgrimage is also present in America, such as the grave of Samuel Lewis in New Mexico and the \textit{mażār} of Bawa Muhaiyadeen in Pennsylvania. However, Westerlund (2004, 34) notes that Western culture has decreased the practice of shrine worship, which is typical in South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, as well as spiritual healings which resemble exorcisms because of their similitude to superstitious practices.

An issue of much debate for Sufis in America is the acceptable level of acculturation. This involves considerations regarding authenticity and brings into question the extent to which the movements in America should retain or adopt traditions common to Sufi movements in Islamic cultures. According to Hermansen (2000), many in America argue that blending into Western society makes the Sufi movement more authentic than taking on foreign cultural mannerisms. Zarcone (1999, 115) points out that religious converts carry with them pressures to change the less-accepted features of their new religions. In particular, the involvement of women has been an issue of debate. While women are often participants in Islamic \textit{tariqas} in the East (McElwain 2004, 98), opportunities for distinguished leadership are typically limited. Western women have challenged normative Islamic and Eastern cultural concepts of gender roles (Hermansen 2006b). Two examples of female \textit{shaykhs} among the American Sufi movements include: Shaykha Fariha Fatima, who reports that in 1985 she was initiated as leader of the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa by Shaykh Ozak, and Rabia Martin, who was made the head of the Sufi Movement in America by Inayat Khan in 1912 but later experienced rejection by the European branch (Westerlund 2004, 24). Female participation and leadership opportunities vary greatly depending on the Sufi movement.

\textsuperscript{37} See http://www.dancesofuniversalpeacena.org/ (accessed July 15 2010).

\textsuperscript{38} For example, the Alami Tariqa has staked out the site of a future mosque behind the \textit{tekiya} in Waterport.
Also, a significant number of Sufi movements in America are structured differently than traditional Sufi tarīqas. Customarily, murīds gather around a shaykh for spiritual guidance. Those which diverge from this model usually offer some type of personal instruction, guidance with practices, and differing ranks or increasing responsibilities (Hermansen 2000). However, this varies depending on the type of movement, leadership style, and size of the membership. Networking through participation in Sufi seminars and conferences is also considered a distinct quality of Sufism in America. This demonstrates some of the ways Sufi movements have adapted to the Western seeker.

Since September 2001, Sufis have been put in the awkward position of being referred to, in the West, as the “good” Muslims. This is typically a politically-motivated statement that disempowers an already marginalised religious community. It places Sufis in the unfair situation of being “asked to line up in the politically quietist camp, so that they can be validated” by non-Muslim Westerners (Safi 2011). The other side of the coin is to be grouped with Muslim terrorists, being guilty by association with Islam. This over simplified association does not solve the underlying issues of unrest between the West and Islam.

Against popular belief, Sufis are not passive participants in society. They have historically been active in politics, often serving as advisors to emperors and being involved in popular struggles against tyrannical and colonial powers (Trimingham 1971; Heck 2009; Stjernholm 2009). As Heck (2009, 14) offers, “It is best to speak of the politics of Sufism in terms of engaged distance – engaged with society but in principle distant from worldly power” (italics in original). For example, various tarīqas were instrumental in opposing imperial and colonial powers in the nineteenth century including against the Russians in the North Caucasus and the French in North Africa (van Bruinessen and Day Howell 2007, 10). Also, the Bektashi Tariqa was associated with the elite Janissaries of the Ottoman military for centuries (Rahman 1979, 151). Additionally, Sufis may engage with politics through participation in humanitarian activities, educational programs, and interfaith gatherings, often acting as ethical guides in the midst of society (Heck 2009, 14).

The actions of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa provide an example of Sufis taking a stand regarding Sufism and its position within Islam. There are several organisations associated with this tarīqa including the As-Suna Foundation of America (ASFA) and the more visible Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA). The former strives to unite
the Muslims in America through education and by making original sources of Islamic knowledge from the various schools of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) available and accessible. The latter organisation, which is more controversial, presents itself as a resource for Muslims in America to help develop moral excellence, advance correct knowledge about Islam beliefs and practices based on original Islamic sources, and provide “practical solutions” and assist with issues that arise from living in this secular, Western society.\(^{39}\) According to the ISCA mission statement on its website, it also aims to work with non-Muslim individuals and organisations to “present Islam as a religion of moderation, tolerance, peace and justice” and further the connection with Judaism and Christianity. In other words, the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa has attempted to position itself as a legitimate source representing moderate Islam in America (Draper 2006, 119-120). This position was demonstrated, as previously mentioned, when Shaykh Hisham made the statement to the U.S. State Department in 1999 concerning the apparent overwhelming spread of extremist Islam among 80 percent of the Muslims in America.\(^{40}\) This statement offended a number of Muslims and Muslim organisations including those which also claimed to represent moderate Islam, such as Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), and inadvertently created additional difficulty between Sufis and other Muslims in America.

Furthermore, the equation of Sufism with “good” and Islam with “evil” serves to conceptually separate Sufis from Islam, and it assumes incorrectly that the beliefs and practices of Sufis innately differ from other Muslims. This is not the case except among those movements which have been inspired by Sufism and identify themselves as Sufi but do not espouse Islam. These movements are not part of traditional Sufism, but must be understood as a newer development.

From his research on the Sufis in New York City following 9/11, Dressler (2009, 80-81) offers three “ideal-typical Sufi-Muslim responses” to the American environment: 1) criticism and seclusion, 2) active involvement within society while maintaining a distinct identity through religious and cultural aspects, and 3) merging Sufi-Muslim and American identities to create an “American Islam.” The first response is typified by the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa community in Manhattan headed by Shaykh Abdul Kerim, a Turkish-Cypriot and reportedly a *khalifa* (representative) of Shaykh Nazim. Shaykh Abdul Kerim considers American society to be overwhelmed with dangers for the Muslim and urges his ethnically-diverse community not to get involved in it more than

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\(^{39}\) See: http://www.islamic supremecouncil.org/home/about-us.html.

\(^{40}\) In addition, claiming to represent moderate Islam, Shaykhs Nazim and Hisham have approached other governing bodies, including in Uzbekistan, and offered assistance to lessen the influence and spread of fundamentalist Islam (Nielsen, Draper, and Yemelianova 2006, 111-112).
what is necessary. Belief that the world is ending soon provides support for this seclusion from society, in preference for spending time improving the self. The second response is to have patriotism for both America and for an original homeland, and to retain a connection to the homeland through cultural activities and language. This is demonstrated by the Murid Sufi Movement, started by Shaykh Amadou Bamba of Senegal, which is active in American society and proudly displays American and Senegalese flags during cultural activities (Abdullah 2009, 204).

The third ideal—typical response by Muslim Sufis in America is blending the Islamic and American identities (Dressler 2009, 83). This is exemplified by the Alami Tariqa, which embodies the concept of American Islam by consisting mostly of American citizens who live according to shari‘a law. While holding millenarian beliefs that the Last Days are approaching, Shaykh Asaf encourages his community to be active in the world and to help alleviate the suffering of others. Another example of blending the American and Sufi identity is Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf of the Shadhili-Qadiri Tariqa, who is the leader behind the proposed Park51 community project near Ground Zero (Dressler 2009, 83-84).41 He and his wife, Daisy Khan, actively support a joint American-Muslim identity and promote the concept that “core Islamic values overlap with core American values” (Rauf 2004, 1). In his book, Imam Rauf (2004, 260) encourages the development of a healthy American Muslim identity that is “fully Islamic, fully American, and fully committed to the values of the Abrahamic ethic.”

Conclusions

In light of globalisation, the American constitutional right to religious freedom has given rise to a pluralistic religious environment. Regardless of the forces of secularisation, religion remains important to a large number of Americans, although they are increasingly involved in religious and spiritual alternatives to the mainstream traditions. Sufism is present and expanding in modern America as an alternative option, contrary to the earlier assumptions of many scholars that Sufism was moribund.

Sufism entered into America in two main waves, the first of which occurred in the early 1900s and propagated it as a universal spirituality from the East (Webb 2006). The second took place in connection to the counter culture of the 1960s and 1970s, when a greater number of Sufis from Muslim countries immigrated to the U.S. and there was

heightened interest in alternative religions among Americans. Presently, Sufism has entered into a third phase which involves establishing firm roots in the American setting and increased political activism.

Sufism has become manifested in very diverse ways, challenging the traditional concept of it as Islamic mysticism. While some Sufi movements conform closely to Sufi tariqas found in Muslim countries, others resemble the New Age phenomena and lack an Islamic foundation. They tend to differ in regards to four elements: 1) orientation to Islam, 2) ethnic composition, 3) acculturation to the Western setting, and 4) organisational components. These differences reflect the negotiation of religion and personal identities in modern times in relation to both Islam and the West.

Although Sufism in America inevitably shares characteristics with Sufism in other Western settings, it is distinct from Sufism elsewhere regarding a number of issues. Noticeably, the variations in its acculturation are substantial, particularly in religious orientation and organisational features. Also, Hermansen (2000) points out that Americanised qualities of Sufism are discerned in the two areas of “translation” and “institutions.” The former includes publications, public performances, and artistic expressions, while the latter refers to the creation of sacred spaces such as mosques, tekiyas, tomb shrines, and maqāms. Sufi movements in America are also testing appropriate levels of acculturation regarding gender roles and leadership, as detected in a tendency among some Sufis to have more than one shaykh, attend conferences where several shaykhs are speakers, and have women as Sufi leaders. The Sufis in America are vibrant, diverse, and eclectic. They are actively navigating their identities in relation to both Islam and the West. This diversity is the modern expression of Sufism in the U.S.
CHAPTER TWO

The Alami Tariqa:
An Example of Third-Wave Sufism in America

I know
there are no birch trees in Konya.
They grow farther north
under a silver sky
mirrored in brownish brooks
in the Sarmathian steppe
or in Upstate New York…

– Annemarie Schimmel, Mirror of the Eastern Moon, 1978

Sufi shaykhs who travel and establish religious communities in previously non-Muslim lands in effect conquer the space by the introduction of new moral norms and cultural aspects. Travel both attests to the charisma of a shaykh and serves to develop his charismatic nature. As Werbner (1996, 310) demonstrates in her study of Sufi Zindapir’s transnational Pakistani Sufi movement in Great Britain, “the moral conquest of alien space is a test of charismatic authenticity that legitimises the rise of new ‘living saints.’” Shaykhs who establish tariqas in non-Muslim environments by drawing from the local populations engage with the cultural and religious differences in the new setting more than those who transplant ethnic communities. In these cases, the universal instinctive appeal of humanity to relate to a higher essence of life plays an important role in drawing individuals to Sufism (Jawad 2006, 160; Weismann 2007b, 167). Hybridisation with local norms has led to vast diversities in the practical application of Sufism in America, as discussed in the previous chapter (Hermansen 1998).

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1 In the beginning verses of Schimmel’s translated variation of Rumi’s poetry found above, she elusively refers to the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, N.Y. Although Schimmel never visited Waterport, according to Shaykh Asaf, she reportedly interacted with him in the unseen, spiritual world, and was aware of this tariqa community. The Sarmathian Steppe is the historical origin of the Croatian people, and Shaykh Asaf considers this poem to refer to the Alami Tariqa.
The Alami Tariqa represents a significant and distinct part of Sufism in America by appealing to North Americans of various ethnic backgrounds while employing a traditional, Islamic foundation for exploring the universal yearnings of humanity for deeper meaning in life. Following Shaykh Asaf’s arrival in 1969, having left the former Yugoslavia for political reasons, he became established in America as an example and teacher of Sufi wisdom from south-eastern Europe. While the Alami Tariqa has its roots in Webb’s (2006) second wave of Sufism in America due to its initial appeal among spiritual seekers who had little concept of Islam, the third wave more accurately describes its current existence and focus on improving the well-being of humankind through educational and humanitarian activities. This wave delineates activities of Sufi movements, mostly since the 1990s, which address general issues of survival beyond the first generation and issues emerging from globalisation. These often include concerns stemming from migration, intra-faith and inter-faith dialogues, the revival of Islam worldwide, the dialogue with modernity, and the interaction of “Eastern” and “Western” forces.

This chapter explores the Alami Tariqa as an example of third-wave Sufism in America due to its negotiation of modern issues facing alternative Islamic movements in the U.S. and its involvement in local and international humanitarian issues. Initially, the Balkan roots of this ṭariqa are presented, including a brief discussion of Balkan Sufism, the ṭariqa roots of the Alami Order, and an overview of Shaykh Asaf. Next, the presence of the Alami Tariqa in America is discussed through a historical lens. Most of the historical data was gathered during an interview with an individual in Waterport known as the ṭariqa community historian. The information was confirmed in various discussions with other murīds and Shaykh Asaf in March of 2011. In the final section, this chapter looks at the contemporary existence of the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, specifically in its leadership, membership, and activities. This chapter aims to demonstrate how the Alami Tariqa has embraced the requirements necessary for continued relevance and long-term survival in America.
Islam in the Balkans has been strongly influenced by the presence of Sufi ṭarīqas to the extent that Sufism permeates the local practice of Islam. Raudvere (2009, 51) points out that many Bosnian Muslims, even if they do not participate in a ṭarīqa, consider the Sufi traditions to be a distinguishing element of Bosnian Islam. The widespread and prominent status historically enjoyed by Sufi ṭarīqas is linked to the critical role of travelling shaykhs in introducing Islam in the area (Algar 1971; Norris 1993; Pennanen 1993) and later because of how the majority of Sufi orders upheld the orthodox Sunni Ottoman establishment (Çehajic 1986; 2002).

During Ottoman rule in the Balkans, which lasted for over 500 years, the majority of Sufis enjoyed a legitimate place in society, and the ṭarīqas thrived. Members of both the elite society and the general population were involved in Sufism, with the well-educated typically joining the more sober orders, including the Mevlevi Tariqa, and the rural areas appreciating the less orthodox orders, such as the Bektashi Tariqa. The ṭarīqas provided not only for religious and spiritual devotions, but also formed the backdrop for work, social, and familial networks and political associations (Bringa 1995; Norris 2006). Ottoman rule significantly declined in the Balkans with the signing of the Treaty of San Stefano in March 1878 and the Congress of Berlin four months later. This was followed by a mass migration of Muslims out of the area, with some shaykhs even moving the türbes (graves) from the tekiyas with them (Popović 1985, 246). Although many ṭarīqas retained representation in the Balkans, their presence and influence was greatly decreased.

Beginning around 1945, Communism brought new challenges for the Balkan religions and caused further decline of the Sufi orders. Although it did not formally forbid religion, it attempted to infiltrate and systematically discredit religious organisations. As a case in point, the politically-manipulated ʿulamaʿ (Islamic congregation of scholars) closed the tekiyas and attempted to prevent ṭarīqa activities from 1952 until 1977 due to considerations that Sufism was an outdated and superstitious practice (Raudvere 2009, 55; Abiva n.d.2). However, the passing of time led to a general disregard of these

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2 Huseyin Abiva is also known as James L. Abiba.
3 This is similar to 1925, when Kemal Atatürk closed the Sufi meeting places in Turkey, and the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa continued meeting underground (Geels 1996, 231).
restrictions. The orders began functioning openly again due to valiant efforts by various 
*shaykhs* and the establishment of a coalition of Sufi orders in November of 1974 (Popović 
1985, 244). This coalition was initially called SIDRA (*Savez islamskih dervišhkih redova 
Alijje u SFRJ*) but then changed its name to ZIDRA (Community of Islamic Dervish 
Orders) of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). This unification of Sufi 
orders was practically unprecedented, and it served as a separate umbrella organisation 
from the state-approved association responsible for matters concerning the Balkan 
Muslims, known as IZ (*Islamska Zajednica*).

Ignorance and a general lack of popularity of the Sufis *fārīqas* at that time among 
ordinary Muslims decreased their ability to rebound immediately. Knowledge of Islam 
had been severely stifled by the efforts of Communism, and “Muslim” more often 
denoted a cultural identity rather than strong religious belief. Regardless of these 
challenges, by the early 1980s, Popović (1985, 245) documented nine functioning Sufi 
orders in Yugoslavia for an estimated total of between 60 and 100 *tekiyas*. Also, Bringa 
(1995) notes that *fārīqas* were again functioning and integral to village life in Bosnia by 
the mid-1980s but still ridiculed at times by the IZ, which desired to gain control over the 
free-minded Sufis. While conducting research on contemporary Sufism in Sarajevo, 
Bosnia, in 2007, I witnessed a general trend toward increased adherence to Islam, 
particularly among the younger population, and observed that certain *fārīqas* were 
growing, including the Naqshbandi and Qadirī (Hazen 2008).

It was noticeable during my research in Bosnia that Sufi practices remained 
integral in the local practice of Islam regardless of the recent influx of more radical 
interpretations of Islam. The foreign understandings were partially introduced by 
mujāhidin (freedom fighters) who came to defend Islam during the latest war, some of 
whom settled in the area. Also, international powers, predominantly Saudi Arabia, have 
provided funding for the rebuilding of mosques and *medressas* (religious schools) and 
attempted to influence the local Islamic organisations with their Wahhabi interpretation of 
Islam, much to the dismay of the Balkan Muslims (Bougarel 2005; Deliso 2007). The 
local Muslims are largely unappreciative of foreign influences attempting to “teach” them 
Islam, and this is one factor that has inspired a contemporary wide-spread rediscovery of 
their native Islam.⁴

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⁴ This “rediscovery” is inevitably impacted by interactions with other forms of Islam in the local/global 
exchange of ideas.
The Alami Tariqa has roots in the Rifa’i Tariqa and the Hayati branch of the Khalwati Tariqa, both of which have been important in the Balkans. The Khalwati Tariqa has historically been the largest and most widespread Sufi order in the Balkans and likely remains so, particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia (Norris 1993, 111). It is known for upholding Sunni Islam, and many religious scholars (‘ulamā’) were also shaykhs in this order. Among its most common practices, it is known for strict ascetic training of murīds through spiritual retreats (khalwats). At the height of this order in the seventeenth century, there were hundreds of Khalwati tekiyas throughout the Balkans, although this order enjoyed greater popularity in Albania, Kosovo, and Macedonia than in Bosnia or Hercegovina. Several minor branches of the Khalwati order are important in the Balkans, particularly the Hayati, which was brought to Macedonia in 1667 by Shaykh Muhammad Hayati (Norris 1993, 111).

Known for its less orthodox practices, the Rifa’i Tariqa, which originated in Iraq, was also prevalent in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire. It is documented by Ottoman historian Huseyin Abiva as entering into the Balkans in two waves, the first of which occurred in the late 1700s and focused mostly in Macedonia and Bulgaria, and the second of which entered Bosnia during the 1800s largely by the efforts of Shaykh Musa Muslihuddin of Kosovo (d. 1917). This order was appreciated mostly in the rural areas, where people were awed by the murīds’ abilities to withstand poisonous stings, extreme pain, and temperature changes (Trimmingham 1971, 37-40). Following the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent difficulties under Communist rule, including the aforementioned restriction on tariqa activities throughout the Balkans, Shaykh Jemali Shehu of Prizren, Kosovo, was a major force in re-establishing the Rifa’i Tariqa in the 1970s and 1980s (Abiva, n.d).

In contrast to the Khalwati Tariqa, the Rifa’i Tariqa at times has received criticism of being heretical due to its rituals that challenge the normal concepts of human potential (Čehajić 1986). Nicolaas Biegman’s (2007; 2009) use of photography documents the Rifa’i dhikrs in Macedonia and shows the murīds piercing their bodies with steel daggers during ecstatic dhikr with no blood flowing or signs of discomfort. Two first-hand accounts of passionate Rifa’i dhikrs held in the Balkans are provided in H. T. Norris’

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(2006, 70-74) book: the description written by Johann von Asboth\(^6\) reflects on the dignity and sobriety of the *dhikr*, while Margaret Hasluck\(^7\) attempts to rationalise the lack of pain and flowing blood. These practices are considered by the *murīds* as evidence of a *shaykh’s baraka* (blessings, charisma) and demonstrate the greatness of God.

\*Shaykh Asaf\*

Born in 1940 in Stolac, Hercegovina, Shaykh Asaf studied at a number of *tekiyas* throughout the Balkans, often clandestinely as it was during the time of Communist rule and religious study was discouraged.\(^8\) Shaykh Asaf received his *hilāfatnāmeh* (title as leader/shaykh) from the late Shaykh Yahya of the Khalwati-Hayati Tariqa in Ohrid, Macedonia, and the late Shaykh Jemali of the Rifa‘i Tariqa in Prizren, Kosovo. According to Abiba (2007, 5), receiving his *hilāfatnāmeh* from Shaykh Jemali “lends enormous credence to [Shaykh Asaf’s] authority as a shaykh.” His *silsila*, or chain of spiritual transmission, is traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad through both Sayyid Shaykh Ahmad al-Rifa‘i al-Husseini, Shaykh of the Age, founder of the Rifa‘i Tariqa, which is one of the original main Sufi orders, and Shaykh Muhammad Hayati Sultan, founder of the Hayati branch of the Khalwati Tariqa.

Shaykh Asaf is considered to be well educated by both Islamic and Western standards. By the age of 13, he had memorised the Qur’an and was declared a *ḥāfiz* by two of his private teachers. He was educated in a *medressa* (Islamic school) and trained in *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) in Bosnia and Croatia, which qualifies him as a jurist of Hanafi *shaafi‘a* law. He also received the rank of *ḥājjī* because of his participation in several pilgrimages to Mecca (*ḥājj*)

Shaykh Asaf earned four doctorate degrees (M.D., D.V.M., Ph.D., D.Sc.) and continued his academic career with two post-doctoral fellowships at Oxford, England, and Ottawa, Canada. He has published over 70 medical papers and given over 200 invited lectures, including to the Royal Society and Department of Defence in London, U.K.; both Houses of Parliament of Japan; and the U.S. Congress. In 2004, Shaykh Asaf was awarded the Nuclear Free World International Peace Prize given by 32 countries in Jaipur, Rajastan, India, for his humanitarian work. He presently serves as the director of

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\(^6\) Originally documented in Johann von Asboth (1890), *An Official Tour of Bosnia and Hercegovina*, London.

\(^7\) This account is Margaret Hasluck’s unpublished letter of an unknown date written to a certain Mrs. Hunter in London.

\(^8\) Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, January 23, 2011.
the Uranium Medical Research Centre, Inc., and, in this capacity, uses his knowledge to increase understanding of global nuclear effects. In addition, Shaykh Asaf is an internationally recognised poet, and his literary works are included in the Vatican’s Anthology of Spiritual Poetry on Christ. In 1970, Shaykh Asaf was an invited guest of the Vatican at the canonisation of Catholic Croatian Franciscan martyr of the twelfth century Nicholas Tavilić.

While living in the former Yugoslavia prior to his post-doctoral studies, Shaykh Asaf was instructed to travel to the West by Shaykh Muhammad Hayati Sultan. In 1969, Shaykh Asaf travelled to Canada for political reasons with no intention of establishing a \textit{tariqa} in America. However, individuals were drawn to him as a spiritual teacher, and over the next four decades, Shaykh Asaf organised Sufi gatherings in Toronto and Ottawa, Canada, and New York, Ohio, Maryland, and Delaware, U.S. The community in Waterport, N.Y., became the main Sufi headquarters while the others lessened in importance, except in Washington, D.C. and Quebec, Canada, where tekiyas and wakîls (representatives) remain. This has occurred partially because of the movement of individuals to Waterport and also because many of the tekiyas were Shaykh Asaf’s personal residences. As he moved to another location, they were typically closed unless a qualified individual resided nearby to carry on the responsibility as his representative.

Initially, Shaykh Asaf established the \textit{tariqa} in connection with the Khalwati-Hayati Order. Elements of the Rifa’i were added in the mid-1980s when Shaykh Jemali visited New York. Then, after receiving permission from his superiors to create a new \textit{tariqa} branch, it was announced as the Alami Tariqa in the early 1990s. In Arabic, \textit{\'alam\i} means: “of the world, universe, creation” (Salmoné 1978). Instead of drawing attention to the founder of the branch, as most do, this title describes the mission of the \textit{tariqa}. It signifies that this order is not limited to a particular location or ethnicity and that its focus is on relieving the suffering of humankind regardless of race, religion, or gender.

According to Shaykh Asaf, “The philosophy of the Alami Tariqa is contained in amalgamating the traditional doctrines of the well established concepts with an environment removed geographically and temporary from its ancient source.” This was

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10 This instruction came from personal communication at the grave of Pir Muhammad Hayati Sultan. It is believed that the soul of a person who dies remains accessible and can interact from the grave.
11 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, March 4, 2011.
12 Shaykh Asaf was also instrumental in establishing the first mosque in Ottawa, Canada, in the early 1970s.
13 Written communication with a mur\=\textit{id}, May 27, 2011.
14 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, March 5, 2012.
inspired by a well-known *hadith* from the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad: “Farther they are from me in the time and space, more holy and reward-deserving they shall be.”

The roots of Alami Tariqa are based on the twelfth century advent of the five grand *aqtab* (those who established the foundation for Sufism, esteemed reference points of the time) and built upon the Rifa’i tradition of Shaykh Ahmed Rifa’i, originating in Basra and Umm ul-Ubayda. The other important component of the Alami roots is based on the teachings of Khalwati tradition through Pir Muhammad Hayati Sultan, Shaykh al-Arabi wal Ajam (Shaykh of the Arabs and the West). True to the tradition of hagiographies, his influence of bringing the *tariqa* to the European continent is shrouded in the myth and legend, including a miraculous journey from Macedonia to Istanbul and back to Ohrid in three days when he sought permission of the Ottoman Emperor to establish a *tekiya* in Ohrid, contrary to the refusal of the local governor. Other famous *shaykhs* of the *tariqa* who reached the West include Shaykh Hindi Baba, who established a *tekiya* in Vučedol, Croatia, south of the Hungarian border on the Danube River, while serving as spiritual advisor of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in his expedition to Hungary and Austria. Another early teacher of Sufism in the West was Shaykh Gul Baba, whose *tekiya* still exists in Budapest, Hungary.

The Alami Tariqa went farther West, beyond Europe, partially based on the instruction received by Shaykh Asaf from Pir Muhammad Hayati to travel to the “far West.” Shaykh Asaf considers himself a *muhāʿirī fi sabil Allāh* (person in a new land for the sake of God), thus relating to the Muslims who were instructed by the Prophet Muhammad to leave Mecca and establish a permanent presence in Medina by purchasing land there. Shaykh Asaf’s task was rewarded by the approval of Shaykh Yaya Tahir of the Khalwati-Hayati Tariqa in Ohrid, Macedonia, who visited the *tekiya* in Waterport on two occasions and issued a formal *tasdiknameh* (certificate), permitting the opening of the *tekiya* in upstate New York. In contrast to the early Sufi presence in south-eastern Europe, which was marked by the reluctant Muslim population of the newly-acquired Ottoman provinces, the Western outreach across the Atlantic Ocean was to the land of non-Muslims, whose diversity in the spiritual quest was not burdened by the restricting doctrines of the traditional Muslim environment, thus enabling the traditional *tariqa* to amalgamate in the vibrant society of the spiritual seekers of the new world.

In addition to being established in North America, the Alami Tariqa is represented by *tekiyas* in Bosnia, Croatia, Denmark, and Sweden. Also, Shaykh Asaf’s *murīds* live throughout Britain, Europe, Turkey, the Middle East, South Asia, and South Africa.
While Shaykh Asaf spends most of his time in the Eastern United States, he periodically visits the other Alami communities. He has hosted annual Sufi conferences since the late 1990s through the auspices of the World Sufi Foundation, which is an aspect of this ṭariqa, at various international Alami tekîyas including in Sweden, Denmark, and Croatia. He encourages his murîds to maintain relations across international boundaries, and it is not uncommon for them to collaborate on projects and travel together for a scholarly or humanitarian purpose. Cross-cultural marriages between Alami communities have occurred as well.

The History of the Alami Tariqa in America

The Pioneer Years (1969-1977)

Shaykh Asaf arrived in Canada in November of 1969. While completing his academic training in medicine, a small community of individuals gathered around him, many of whom were involved in alternative therapies and the general counter-culture of the time. Most knew little about Islam, but they were drawn by Shaykh Asaf’s personality and teachings.

Shaykh Asaf took a somewhat gradual approach to implementing Islamic practices among those who gathered around him, which is common among hybrid Sufi movements in America. This technique encourages the early involvement of spiritual seekers in Sufism who may not have the desire to initially join an Islamic movement, but who may come to appreciate Islam after a gradual introduction. Laying the framework for understanding Islamic practices, Shaykh Asaf taught his early students the underlying principles in a manner that elevated them above routine doctrine and connected them with other ethical and religious traditions. Shaykh Asaf’s main teaching tools were his example and providing the murîds with hands-on experiences. For example, he sometimes instructed individuals to feed the disadvantaged in the city, which served as

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15 These section titles were originally used in a talk given by a murîd, who is considered to be the ṭariqa historian of Waterport, in Denmark in October 2008. They have been used here and altered, as appropriate, with his permission. The historical information came from an interview with a murîd who acts as the historian of the Alami Tariqa, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

16 See Hermansen (1998, 158-159) for other examples, including the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa, and the possible intention of Inayat Khan to move his students toward formal Islam. See Webb (2006) for details of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

17 Personal communication with a murîd, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
a lesson in charity (ṣadaqā) and set the framework for understanding zakāt (annual Islamic requirement of giving usually 2.5 percent of one’s wealth to charity).

Within the first year of Shaykh Asaf accepting his first murīds in Canada, he introduced and established the Islamic framework as essential for the ǂarĩğa members. In his *Sufi Code of Conduct*, Shaykh Asaf comments:

> You cannot even start this [Sufi] path before being in the state of Islam ... For every single step, starting with the step number one, it is assumed that you are in the state of tawhīd and shahāda ... The Hindu has his own steps and they may bring him to the highest levels, but not on this particular path. (Shaykh Asaf 2004, 131)

This statement clearly demonstrates his view that Islam is necessary for the Sufi path. Until the murīds memorised Qur’anic verses for use in the required daily prayers, the Lord’s Prayer from the Bible was allowed to be temporarily supplemented for the opening verses of the Fatiha. Shaykh Asaf encouraged his murīds to interact with other Muslims by sending them to observe and participate in Friday worship at nearby Islamic centres. Shaykh Asaf also led them toward behaviour that was considered appropriate and correct according to his interpretation of Islam. This included asking couples who were intimate but not married to either marry or to separate, an issue agreed upon by many moral and religious codes. As the years passed and Shaykh Asaf considered it appropriate or necessary, he addressed other practices and lifestyle changes.

This was a non-threatening way for Americans, many of whom had hesitation toward formal Islam, to be introduced to this religion. As an example, Amir was one of Shaykh Asaf’s first murīds in Canada.\(^\text{18}\) He came from a Jewish background and had been experimenting with New Age and alternative paths when he was introduced to Shaykh Asaf.\(^\text{19}\) For the first six months of their time together, the shaykh did not discuss the name of the spiritual path or disclose any affiliation, and Amir was unaware that Shaykh Asaf was associated with Islam or even Sufism. During this time, though, Amir became convinced that Shaykh Asaf was meant to be his spiritual guide. Amir is a unique example amongst the murīds because he joined the ǂarĩqua prior to taking the shahāda, but his later decision to accept Islam demonstrates the success of this gradual approach.

\(^{18}\) Interview with “Amir,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y. All interviews were confidential. The names of the interviewees are replaced by pseudonyms by mutual agreement.

\(^{19}\) It is common for murīds in Sufi movements that accommodate Islamic Sufism with aspects of Western culture to come from spiritually seeking “universalist” backgrounds (Hermansen 1998, 158).
Shaykh Asaf slowly introduced *dhikr* and esoteric rites into his teachings with Amir and the few others present at the time. Also, he encouraged Amir to go on *hajj*. This was done by focusing on the spiritual benefit of travelling to a sacred location revered by all of the Abrahamic religions. During the interview, thinking back to this time, Amir stated firmly that if he had been told outright that this path was Islam without the gradual introduction, he would have rejected it. However, his time with Shaykh Asaf had softened his preconceptions and allowed him a unique glimpse into the universal message of Islam.

Only a couple of weeks prior to leaving for Saudi Arabia, Amir was taught the outer form of Islam, including the prayers, and officially became Muslim. However, by taking the *shahāda*, he relayed that he was not completely aware that he was “signing in on the dotted line of being a Muslim.” He considered himself a believer in God, but likely had not internalised at that time the definitive and wider implications of saying the *shahāda* in front of witnesses.

Going to *hajj* with limited knowledge of Islam and only the instruction from Shaykh Asaf that “Allah will guide you,” Amir had a profound, heart-felt experience while that inspired him to personally commit to Islam:

That was the best, the best way to discover Islam because I was standing beside people on [Mount] Arafat and they had their prayer books out and you’re supposed to say this prayer at this time, and that prayer at that time, and what do we do next. And, I didn’t have a clue what was going on. I was just following people and walking around. And, it was all just, it was all just coming in. So, if I had been using my brain, it would have been less than the experience that it was.\(^\text{20}\)

Instead of being sidetracked by the ritual requirements of the *hajj*, Amir had a spiritual experience that allowed him to personally embrace Islam. He learned what it meant to be a Muslim without interference from superfluous labels, preconceived ideas, or forced participation, and he accepted Islam as his religion. Chapter Four discusses conversion themes of the *murīds* in greater detail.

In 1977, Shaykh Asaf moved to the U.S. and became associated with the Muslim community in Rochester, New York. Although there were communities of African American, Arab, Pakistani, and Turkish Muslims, the greater Rochester Muslim community lacked a mosque (Sonn 1994). In lieu of this, they met for *jum’a* (Friday prayers) and *tafsīr* (discussion) at the Interfaith Chapel of the University of Rochester, New York. Amongst those who attended the activities led by Shaykh Asaf grew a

\(^{20}\) Interview with Amir, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
noticeable inner circle of about 13 men and women. These were his murīds, some of whom drove three hours from Toronto, Canada, to attend these weekly gatherings.

The individuals who joined the ṭariqa in these early years were very eclectic. Some had elementary understanding of the connection of Sufism to Islam, while others were fully-practicing Muslims and had been for many years. One convert to Islam who met Shaykh Asaf while participating in a Ramadan dinner in Rochester and later became his murīd, described the shaykh as being handsome, “smart, and engaging.” Several murīds discussed during the interviews how Shaykh Asaf served to unify them at this time, and without his presence, they probably would not have been close friends because of their different backgrounds, lifestyles, and professional pursuits.

The Formative Years (1977-1980)

Not long after moving to Rochester, New York, Shaykh Asaf sent a murīd in search of a building “somewhere in the North-Eastern United States” that could function as a tekiya. A farmhouse in Lyndonville was purchased later in 1977, which was located about 70 kilometres west of the Rochester Interfaith Chapel. Part of the building was established as a tekiya, and it was fondly referred to as the “Farm.” The ṭariqa community began to expand as murīds settled in the area and started families. Additionally, the World Sufi Foundation was conceptualised around this time with spiritual development as its main focus. This was a precursor to the future transformation of this ṭariqa into the Alami Tariqa with its focus on local and international humanitarian concerns.

The following year, Shaykh Asaf sent two murīds in search of an alternative building to serve as the tekiya in this locale, since the Farm was also the private residence of one of the murīds. In Waterport, 5 kilometres southeast from the “Farm,” an abandoned farm house was found and secured as the new tekiya. Remembering the ease of the endeavour, one murīd relayed:

We drove ... and [the other murīd] saw Fuller Road. And, he said, ‘I’ve never seen that road before. Let’s go down there.’ Surprise, surprise. We went down there, and we saw the tekiya. And it was just, that was it. We walked up to the building, and the building was abandoned, but there was a ‘For Sale’ sign just laying on the side of the building to let us know that

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21 Personal communication with a murīd, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
22 Interview with a murīd, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
either it has just recently been bought or that it had been for sale ... That was amazing.23

After its purchase, the *murīds*, aided by greater understanding of the purpose of a *tekiya*, collaborated to transform the run-down farm house for its new role in the community. The building had a unique interior design with arched doorways, which was appreciated by the *tariqa* members and was believed to contribute to a meditative, spiritual atmosphere. They painted it white and performed minor reconstructions on the building, including removing the heating system on the instruction of the *shaykh*, regardless that the winter temperatures often drop below freezing. One reason for this measure was that Shaykh Asaf observed Americans being too attached to their comforts, which impedes spiritual advancement. He eliminated the wood stove to encourage the *murīds* to face discomfort and overcome it in a similar manner to the ascetics wearing hair shirts. Outside, the large, dilapidated barn was also torn down, and out-house facilities were erected by the *murīds*.

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23 Interview with a *murid*, September 9, 2009. Waterport, N.Y.
“Leave it at the fence. Don’t bring it into the tekiya.”24 Specific places for praying, talking casually, and eating were established in the building. The murīds were each given a key, encouraging a bond of trust amongst the community members.

The Waterport tekiya officially opened in 1979. Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak, of the Khalwati-Jerahi Tariqa in Turkey, and a number of his murīds honoured the Alami community by their visit (ziyāra).25 The day it opened, they ceremonially walked up the gradual hill to the new tekiya with their hands raised in Ḍu‘ā’ (supplication). Later, they contributed energetically to the group dhikr by keeping beat with their drums. It was a very memorable event for the Waterport murīds and helped to legitimise this tariqa as belonging to a well-established, global tradition. It also reinforced the importance of having an official tekiya as a base for the tariqa in America.26

The Developmental Years (Early to late 1980s)

Shaykhs and murīds of different tekiyas around the world visited Waterport throughout the 1980s. They gave support to the new Sufi community by teaching Arabic and recitation of the Qur’an, instructing them in adab (correct behaviour), helping the murīds to adhere to the tradition of Sufism through example and inspiration, and exposing them to a variety of Sufi practices. These visitors also guided the murīds to recognise the larger importance and potential of this tariqa. In the summer of 1980, Shaykh Tahir Yahya of the Khalwati-Hayati Ohrid tekiya in Macedonia came to Waterport. In 1983, three shaykhs visited simultaneously: Shaykh Jemali Shehu of the Rifa’ī Tariqa in Prizren, Kosovo; Shaykha Ana Khalwati-Hayati of the Ohrid tekiya in Macedonia; and Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri of South Africa. Shaykha Ana is the only female teacher (shaykh-zade) to ever visit Waterport. One murid recalled her being “very sweet, very substantial. Not just a nice old lady. She was an ocean.”27 At the age of nearly 90, she was the daughter and wife of shaykhs and very highly respected.

Three years later, in 1986, Shaykh Ahmed Buyuk, imām and caretaker of the mosque and mausoleum for Shaykh Shams of Tabriz in Konya, Turkey, visited the Sufi community in Waterport. He remained in Waterport for three months teaching the

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24 Interview with tariqa community historian, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
25 Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak established the Khalwati-Jerahi Tariqa across America. The strongest community is near New York City under the leadership of Tosun Bayrak (Hermansen 2000).
26 Following the ceremony, the members of the Khalwati-Jerahi Tariqa went to the Interfaith Chapel in Rochester, where they performed dhikr for a public audience. The Khalwati-Jerahi dhikr performance tours across America in the early-1980s are noted by Hermansen (1998, 169).
27 Interview with a murid, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Qur’an, and he returned to Waterport several times over the following years. There were other visitors, too, including Shaykh Abdul Rauf, the late Head Imam of the Islamic Centre of Washington, D.C., who came and helped the Sufi community develop and mature. An additional outcome of the influx of shaykhs was that the Waterport members were exposed to larger themes and history in Sufism. They learned how to distinguish between individuals who were spiritually advanced and those who had ulterior motives. Some of those who visited Waterport subsequently hosted murids from Waterport in their home tekiyas, including in Turkey, Macedonia, Kosovo, and South Africa.

Around this time, the Waterport community established a building, known as the khānaqāh, to house visitors. Later, this building was used for multiple purposes, serving as a school for the children and a free clinic for orphans, military veterans, and those without health insurance. Tekiyas were also established in Maryland and Ohio with local residents serving as representatives of Shaykh Asaf.

When Shaykh Jemali of the Rifa’i Tariqa visited again in 1985, he and Shaykh Asaf presided over the first communal commemoration of Ashura in Waterport in the Balkan tradition as passed down through the silsila. This commemoration was in memory of the historic conflict between Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and Yazid, son of Mu’awiya, the founder of the Umayyad dynasty, which occurred in the seventh century. For the 10 days of Muḥarram (Islamic New Year), the tariqa community was taught about the dramatic events and mourned the deaths of the martyrs of Ahlel Bayt (family of the Prophet Muhammad). Differing from the Shi’a commemorations, which usually involve self-inflicting wounds, the murids were encouraged to participate in self-denial of comforts, such as food and drink during the daylight hours and entertainment, in an attempt to relate to the difficulty experienced by Imam Hussein and his companions. It was the first time that most of the murids had heard of Ashura not only because of their non-Muslim backgrounds, but also because many Sunni Muslims have limited knowledge of this important event. This first commemoration is remembered by the murids as a time of powerful and inspirational dhikrs.

28 The commemoration of Ashura and adherence to the 12 Shi’a Imams are critical aspects of the Bektashi Tariqa, which was very influential throughout the Balkans, although it was more prevalent in Albania than in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ćehajic 1986, 166-185).

29 Shaykh Asaf does not distinguish between Sunni and Shi’a Islam and instead teaches that there is only one Islam, which is distinguished by the shahāda. He follows and teaches according to the Hanafi madhhab, although his murids may be either Sunni or Shi’a.
During the mid-to-late 1980s, Shaykh Asaf received permission to establish a new tariqa branch called the Alami Tariqa, which was implemented gradually over the next decade. Initially, the tariqa shifted from being purely of the Khalwati-Hayati tradition by adding elements of the Rifa’i with Shaykh Jemali’s visits in the 1980s, including the commemoration of Ashura and dhikr rituals of piercing the body with sharp instruments that resulted in no visible wounds or pain. Then, it became known as the Alami Tariqa in the mid-1990s and increased its humanitarian efforts. However, elements of the Khalwati-Hayati and Rifa’i Tariqas remain integral to the contemporary practices of the Alami Tariqa. They can be observed in the spiritual retreats (khalwat), which usually last no longer than a week, in the Waterport tekiya and other peaceful, secluded locations. Also, very rarely, this tariqa participates in ecstatic dhikrs during which select male murids are pierced through the arm, hand, chest, or mouth with small daggers and experience no pain or spilled blood.30

The Years of Maturation (1987-2000)

Reflecting the gradual change in identity to the Alami Tariqa, there was a notable shift in focus toward greater service beginning in the late 1980s. In 1987, the Waterport community established a non-profit humanitarian organisation called the World Life Institute. Although the Islamic concepts of service (hizmet) and charity (ṣadaqa) were integral to its mission statement, this organisation was not officially associated with Sufism or Islam.31 According to the World Life Institute’s website, its focus is to “alleviate threats to humanity and the biosphere as a whole through education, research, and service.”32 As a murid explained, “Personal experiences were pushing us to participate in the world. We were helping those in need.”33 They purposefully downplayed religion in an attempt to limit stereotyping of the organisation and to prevent alienation of the non-Muslims who participate in the programs that developed over the next several decades. Murids with professional training in the sciences conducted research, published articles in scientific journals, and travelled across north-eastern America and internationally giving seminars and lectures to medical personnel.

30 Within the last five years, I witnessed this Rifa’i dhikr twice, once in Waterport and once in Denmark.
31 This is contrary to the understanding of the Town of Carlton historian Lysbeth Hoffman, interviewed by phone on July 13, 2009. She described the tekiya as being the “World Life Institute Mosque.”
33 Personal communication with a murid, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Shaykh Asaf helped with the after effects of the Three Mile Island Disaster, the nuclear power plant explosion which occurred in Pennsylvania in 1979. Additionally, he participated in the rescue of Jewish children harmed during the nuclear power plant explosion in 1987 in the former Soviet Union by assisting The Children of Chernobyl Project through the Chabad-Lyubowich Society and Hadassah University, Jerusalem. As Shaykh Asaf commented, “The mission was to make the world more aware of the cinder box on which they were sitting.”  

While involvement in these projects was inspired by Islamic principles, the intention was to extend aid, education, and awareness regardless of religious affiliation.

Between 1987 and 1989, internal difficulties intensified between the Alami Tariqa communities in Waterport and Cleveland, which are a four hour drive apart. These tensions eventually split the tariqa. The wakil of the community in Cleveland was influenced by a self-declared Turkish shaykh, and they challenged Shaykh Asaf’s authority by voicing contrary teachings. The tensions came to a head when the wakil discouraged the commemoration of Ashura and praised Mu’awiyah, whose son Yazid ordered the deaths of Imam Hussein and his companions at Karbala on Ashura. When asked to choose between Shaykh Asaf and the self-declared shaykh, nearly half of the murids in Cleveland gave allegiance to the self-declared shaykh. It was an extremely difficult time for the Alami murids because many of those in Waterport had close relationships with those in Cleveland. The murids living in Cleveland who remained loyal to Shaykh Asaf were encouraged to move to Waterport, and many did over the following years. The other Sufi community in Cleveland was no longer functioning at the time of my research, having disbanded a few years after the split.

Around 1990, the Waterport community turned its focus to the education of their children. Concerned about the quality of education of the local public school, the parents began home-schooling their young children in various homes based on a rotating schedule. Then they attempted to establish a medressa in a previous church building, but difficulty with the county’s educational regulations halted these plans. Following this, they established a private school known as the Home School Cooperative, chartered by the state of New York, and used the khānaqāh building. College-credit courses were also taught through this cooperative. In 1991, construction began for a school building in Waterport, headed by Alami murids.

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34 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, May 21, 2010, Washington, D.C.
War broke out in the former Yugoslavia between 1992 and 1997, and a number of murīds visited the area on fact-finding tours and humanitarian missions. Shaykh Asaf helped organise the donation of a specialised field hospital with 12 separate mobile units shipped by a frigate from Durban, South Africa, to the Bosnian harbour of Ploče in the southern Adriatic. Murīds, some of whom had training in counselling and film-making, individually delivered medical supplies, clothing, and sacrificed their time to listen to the experiences of the refugees. They heard heart-wrenching stories of rape, death, and being left without family, homes, or even grave sites to return to because these were targeted by the invading forces. The murīds conducted group and family therapy using facilities in Zagreb. At least one murīd also travelled to Sarajevo while it was under siege and conducted therapy programs in association with the local Psychiatric College. A murīd who travelled to the area in 1992 recounted how shocked he was by the hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Croatian-Bosnian border who had overwhelmed the city of Zagreb, Croatia, and he spoke of the human crisis that resulted in the city because of the limited resources. These were very emotional, life-changing experiences for the murīds. As one recalled, being in Croatia and Bosnia during this time “completely rearranged my inner life.”

As a result of having witnessed the crisis, the murīds became spokespeople for the situation in the Balkans. Numerous books and articles were published regarding the plight of the Bosnians and Croatians. They also gave talks at American universities, mosques, churches, synagogues, and military installations to raise awareness of the situation and end the war.

Another outcome of involvement in the Balkans was the creation of Project Life, an annual rehabilitation program for orphans of war and natural disasters. It was inspired by a visit to a school in Sarajevo where 70 percent of the children had either lost a father or whose father had been injured in the war. The program began in Waterport in 1997 with five boys from Bosnia. Each summer since then, orphans of war and natural disasters, between the ages of 8 and 12, have spent between three to five months in Waterport. Through this program, the boys and girls are taught English, receive free medical treatment, play with other children, and are placed in supportive host family situations in the local area. The program aims to initiate the emotional and physical

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36 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, February 28, 2011. Shaykh Asaf gave a dedication speech at the Durban harbour to 10,000 people.
37 Interview with a murīd who acts as the Alami Tariqa historian, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
38 Personal communication with a murīd, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
39 Personal communication with a murīd, November 17, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
healing process and provide the orphans with new skills, confidence, and renewed hope prior to returning to their home country. As the program director recalled telling the Bosnian families and school teachers in 1997, “We don’t want to make [the orphan children] Americans. We want to return them as better Bosnians.”

Since its beginning, over 100 children from Bosnia, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Sri Lanka have participated in the program, and a sister project began in Istria, Croatia, in 2002. Local churches and individuals of various religions regularly volunteer in this humanitarian work.

In 1996, construction for the school in Waterport was completed by the murīds, and the exquisite, octagonal building was named the World Life Institute Education Centre (WLIEC). It began holding lessons soon thereafter, and the first class of High School seniors graduated in June of 1997. The school operated with licensure in the state of New York and offered kindergarten through 12th grade classes for several years. It served local students, regardless of their religion, and several children from outside the Sufi community attended it. High school students graduated from WLIEC between 1997 and 2001, after which it continued to hold elementary school until 2003, at which point there were not enough children to continue operating the school.

Since then, the school has been used for home schooling, the Project Life orphan program, and other programs made possible through a partnership with local education agencies, local universities, and federal and state grants. These programs include teaching English (ESL) to Hispanic agricultural workers and other grant-sponsored classes, such as pottery. This is the first building of a more extensive vision to have a university in Waterport called the Life University.

*The Struggles in Post 9/11 America*

Muslims living in America have often been mistreated and stereotyped as guilty-by-association in the after-effects of September 2001, regardless that America is known for its ideologies of religious freedom and pluralism. This reaction, referred to by many as the 9/11 backlash, caused Muslims in America to question whether religious pluralism was ever meant to include their religion (Moore 2007, 130). In her noteworthy study of the Muslim reaction to 9/11, Lori Peek (2011, 14-15) documents the dramatic increase of discrimination experienced by Muslims after the terrorist attacks. She connects this with a

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40 Interview with a *murīd*, March 21, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
tendency in America to demonise and strip civil liberties from emigrants and ethnic minorities in times of national insecurity and war.

The events in New York City, about 650 kilometres south-east of Waterport, and the resulting heightened anti-Muslim propaganda ushered in a period of difficulty for the Alami Tariqa. Particularly disturbing for the community was when a few individuals, who had been involved in the *tariqa* for nearly 30 years, found alliances in the anti-Islamic atmosphere prevalent in America and Canada and denounced Islam. The individuals attacked the Alami community on various levels for remaining adherent to Islamic principles. These developments shocked many of the *murīds* and harshly gave rise to and reinforced distrust and division between them and individuals outside the *tariqa*.

Prejudice and the propagation of misinformation about Islam have been sizable challenges for the *tariqa* community since it was established in Waterport, but the harassment has amplified within the last decade. While some local non-Muslims with whom I interacted during my fieldwork had very good impressions of the *tariqa*, especially because of the humanitarian projects organised by the community, the misinformation concerning the religious community included rumours of being a cult and sacrificing cats. It also included being derogatively called “that Muslim group.” As one young *murīd* who attended the local public school stated during her interview, “I have been discriminated against for mainly being Muslim. I have been perceived as being backward.”

An example of harassment was found on the Internet website WikiAnswers.com. The entry asks: “Why are Radical Islamofacists hiding in Waterport, New York, at the World Life Institute?” (sic). The answer, written by an unnamed individual, addresses the contradiction of referring to Sufis as radical Islamofascists. A related question on the same site tries to implicate the community in illegal activity by asking, “What is the World Life Institute doing on the coast of Lake Ontario in Waterport, New York?” The answer, written by a Christian who participated in the WLIEC, responded plainly: “Teaching English to migrant workers.” During fieldwork, I encountered misinformation about Islam in Albion when a local, professional woman asked if Allah was a pagan god.

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41 Interview with “Selma,” September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Likely, the children perpetuate the perceptions of their parents, resulting in deep-set prejudice.

The tekiya has been the target of harassment by non-Muslim teenagers. This behaviour, which has been occurring for decades, usually involves teenagers driving recklessly in front of the tekiya late at night and yelling during worship services, but sometimes includes more serious offences involving guns. Regarding the non-threatening pranks, the ṭariqa members assumed that the perpetrators were bored and mischievous local teenagers who had small-town, ignorant mentalities. This behaviour was generally viewed as a nuisance, but not usually dangerous. As Muhammad knowingly commented, “We were all teenagers. That’s the kind of thing you do.” Nuri added, “Every town has an old lady who’s a witch, but I think ... it just has to do with that we’re all frightened by Otherness.” Amirah related her experience of confronting teenagers in the midst of committing a minor offence at the tekiya:

“You know, one time, I caught some kids ... The driver was barely 16, and the kids that she had in the car with her were younger than her, and it was a game. They were like: Run up the hill, and run back down! And, I caught them, and they were like [surprised and scared]: We got caught! You know, and like, it was fun and games to them ... I could be OK with that. But, what I can’t be OK with is taking a knife to our screens or paint-ball the front of our building or ... burning the post, smashing my windshields ... and bullets.”

While this incident was more thrill-seeking than harmful, the more serious offences which the above quote references include setting fire to the fence in front of the tekiya, damaging cars in the parking lot, stealing items from the tekiya, defiling the building, and shooting BBs into its walls. These offences were thought by ṭariqa members to involve adult encouragement or even facilitation. Halloween night and the anniversary of 9/11 were particularly infamous dates for this damaging behaviour to occur, and murīds annually guard the tekiya.

The police responses throughout the years could have been much more diligent, according to many of the murīds interviewed. Since the police officers are often friends or neighbours of those who committed the offences, the Alami community has found it difficult to get consistent responses that would stop the undesired behaviour. For example, in mid-July of 2009, an officer refused to write a report documenting an

44 Interview with “Muhammad,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
45 Interview with “Nuri,” September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
46 Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
47 BBs are ammunition pellets shot by hand held air rifles.
incident because of his personal connection with the teenagers, whom he considered to be “good kids.” While the tekiya was not the only religious building in the local area which has been the target of harassment, Amirah commented, “I think that if we were a Catholic Church or a Protestant Church where the majority were their aunts and uncles and grandparents and sisters and brothers, that [the police] would respond differently.”

As Ramadan neared its end in August 2010, the Alami community experienced two potentially very dangerous situations. The growing awareness of Islamophobia, due to the heated debate concerning Park51, known informally as the “Ground Zero Mosque” in New York City, helped to project these incidents to national headlines covered by the New York Times, CNN, and numerous other media sources. During the evening Ramadan prayers (tarāwīh) at the tekiya on August twenty-seventh, two automobiles were observed speeding by the tekiya and loud anti-Islamic messages and obscenities were heard. After the prayers finished and most of the tariqa members had left, the same automobiles returned to the tekiya, and someone in the cars fired a rifle shot before they drove away, tailgating a member of the tariqa. The response from the police was minimal since no one had recorded the license plates of the transgressors.

Three days later, the teenagers returned for a repeat incident. Several male tariqa members were standing near the road, having anticipated their approach, and a 29 year-old murid was side-struck by one of the automobiles. Then, similar to the previous episode, one of the teenagers fired a shot toward the tekiya before driving away. Later that night, the automobiles were recognised in a parking lot and blocked by tariqa members until the police arrived. The local police, sheriff’s department, and state police all responded to the emergency calls, which came from both tariqa members and the teenagers in the automobiles, who reported that they were being threatened. The media also appeared on the scene.

As a result, all seven teenagers from the automobiles were arrested, including two young women. One of the young men was charged with a federal offence for carrying an unregistered weapon, and the other six were given misdemeanours for disrupting a religious service, which at least one of the teenagers claimed to be part of “cult” worship during which the members drank blood. Although the harassment had been persistent for decades, it was likely that the increased anti-Muslim rhetoric, due to the Park51 debate, factored into the heightened aggression.

48 I observed part of this event, and the quote is from another murid who interacted directly with the officer.
49 Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Following these events, several local churches, organisations, and individuals, in addition to local and nation-wide Islamic organisations, came forward to offer support to the Alami community, which became known as the World Sufi Foundation in the media coverage. There were requests for interfaith dialogues, inquiries into how non-Muslims could help, and public forums offered to publicise the events. Also, the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) interviewed members of the ṭariqa community in their investigation of potential hate crimes against Muslims in America. To better respond to these developments and the on-going court case involving the teenagers, a committee was formed in the ṭariqa community. Tariqa meetings kept the community informed of incoming letters and allowed for group decision-making regarding the responses. The ṭariqa members participated in several inter-faith dialogues. Although the community members wanted to see justice upheld and the harassment to end, they did not want this incident to damage the teenager’s future prospects in life. Also, there was worry that the nation-wide, negative attention was distorting the reputation of Orleans County, where the tekiya is located.

A public letter was published through The Daily News website on February 23, 2011, presenting the ṭariqa community’s position on these issues. Mr. B. Huzair, director of media relations for the ṭariqa, relates the community’s stance:

Balance, reason and compassion must prevail. These youths’ names, their “mug shots” and their families have been made national spectacles. This is undoubtedly a deeply humiliating consequence of being caught for committing harassment and receiving criminal charges for offences the authorities and the press have associated with a “hate crime.” It is the wish of the World Sufi Foundation that the truth of the crimes is told, that contrition results in a positive outcome for these men and the community. Harm should not come to them through a punitive use of the justice system. We do not seek revenge and we do not consider it right for them to be scapegoated to further others’ agenda. (Huzair 2010)

As time went by, though, there was worry among some of the ṭariqa members that the young men would be let off too easily. In the end, the teenagers pleaded guilty to the charges and were given six months probation. These events have made the residents of Orleans County and the nation aware of the existence and plight of the Sufis living in Waterport, and this has created opportunities for humanitarian outreach and debunking of religious prejudice and misunderstandings.

Many of the murīds consider it important to interact normally with non-Muslims in the area and not to be insular or come across as “strange.” They realise that their
actions could detrimentally impact the image of the Alami community as a whole. As Ismail commented during the interviews, “Something as small as being nice to people on a regular basis, being helpful in the community, and not professing Islam [openly] or converting people on your way, then for people to just realise that people are people – even if it’s just that – it’s a huge deal.”\(^{51}\) However, the religious, ethnic, and professional differences between \(\text{tariqa}\) members and the non-Muslim locals, in addition to local exclusivity toward outsiders and misinformation about the Alami community, complicates the situation by introducing natural divisions between the \(\text{tariqa}\) community and the larger local community.

Shaykh Asaf considers political activeness to be one way to establish the \(\text{tariqa}\) in Orleans County and change attitudes toward the \(\text{tariqa}\) community. He strongly encourages the \(\text{murids}\) to be involved in the local politics, which leans toward the Republican Party (58.5 percent) (Sperling’s 2010). However, on the survey, only eight \(\text{murids}\) (25 percent) self-reported being active in the local politics, likely because of natural disinterest in and tendency to avoid politics. Several \(\text{murids}\) operate small businesses in Albion, and a number of them work in the vicinity.

Several other notable events for the Alami Tariqa have occurred since 2000 which have solidified the presence of this \(\text{tariqa}\) in America. In particular, two American dervishes who have been dedicated to this \(\text{tariqa}\) and its establishment for more than 30 years were given the title of \(\text{shaykh}\) by Shaykh Asaf. The first received this honour in 2004 and the second in 2008. Both of them live in or near Waterport and served as \(\text{wakils}\) for the community in the past. With the inclusion of two American-born \(\text{shaykhs}\) in the \(\text{tariqa}\) lineage, the Alami Tariqa became firmly established in America. Also, this possibly removed the uncertainty concerning the leadership succession of this \(\text{tariqa}\) in the near future, which is a common difficulty for immigrant-led Sufi movements in America.\(^ {52}\)

In addition, Shaykh Asaf held several Sufi gatherings (\(\text{hadra}\)) through the World Sufi Foundation in Sweden (in 1993, 1994, 1998-2002, 2011), Denmark (in 2003, 2004, 2007-2009) and Croatia (in 2010). These gatherings have attracted between 50 and 80 individuals from America, Canada, England, Sweden, Scotland, the Balkans, South Africa, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen, including several \(\text{shaykhs}\), for the purpose of spiritual nourishment and community. The week-long gatherings consisted of daily

\(^{51}\) Interview with “Ismail,” September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\(^{52}\) For example, the Bawa Muahiyaddeen Fellowship experienced difficulty following the death of Bawa since he did not train a successor (Webb 2006).
presentations by various shaykhs and murīds, evening talks by Shaykh Asaf, and group dhikrs. An annual event, the 2012 ḥadra is expected to be held at the Alami tekiya in Istria, Croatia.

Although the Alami community in Waterport is still recovering from the previously-mentioned difficulties, it has entered into a new phase. It has become firmly rooted in American soil with the naming of two American shaykhs. The anti-Muslim harassment which has plagued the community for decades has been brought to the surface so it can be addressed. In addition, its international connection with other Alami communities and ṭariqas has been strengthened through the annual gatherings. Also, the second-generation murīds are expanding the ṭariqa community in Waterport through marriage and a new generation of children. At the time of my research, there were discussions of establishing a mosque and a halāl food store near Waterport, thus potentially attracting other Muslims to the community.

Present Time: Leadership, Membership, and Activities

Leadership

The tradition of the structural leadership is assured by the assignment of duties, which are associated with various spiritual stations (maqāms). These include the chain of responsibilities from the grand shaykh to sub-shaykhs to the wakīls (trustees) and those which involve specific duties, for example the naqīb (guardian of the gates), treasurer, keeper of the record of the dreams, keeper of the chronicles (kātib), the keeper of the tekiya, and director of education. There are also intermittently-assigned additional functions such as the muazzin (announcer of the prayers), ʿimām (leader) and khāṭīb (preacher) for the congregational prayers. Most of the formal responsibilities are currently held by men, except for the keeper of the dreams and keeper of the regalia. The assignment of a particular duty provides an indication of an achieved spiritual station while also aiding with progress toward the next maqām by encouraging spiritual development and providing appropriate challenges.

While Shaykh Asaf acts as the spiritual guide and authority on Islam, he has never been a full-time resident of Waterport. At the time of my research, he visited Waterport for approximately one long weekend per month. However, the frequency and length often varied, and it was reported that, at times, he had not visited for several years, including
when he lived in Saudi Arabia. In his absence, the two men appointed as sub-shaykhs act as community leaders and teachers and maintain communication with Shaykh Asaf. They will become full shaykhs by establishing their own tariqa communities. There are also four men designated by Shaykh Asaf as wakīls in the community. They act under the two sub-shaykhs and oversee various aspects of community life, such as maintaining the tekiya and resolving minor difficulties. In this way, there is an established hierarchy of leadership in Waterport.

### Membership

In total, there are about 100 individuals in the Alami community living in or near Waterport. Fifty-two are official murīds, and the others are Muslim family members who are not tariqa initiates, but participate in the Muslim community activities. There is also a small number of individuals who have special permission from Shaykh Asaf to participate in murīd-only events although they have not taken intisāb (joined the tariqa).

The population of murīds consists mostly of married couples and their children in addition to about five single women. At the time of my research, there were 17 married couples who were murīds and six additional murīds were married to non-murīd Muslims. Being married to non-murīds was an especially common occurrence for those married within the last five years. This is because those looking for spouses tended to view those in the tariqa community as sisters and brothers, preferring to marry individuals from the larger Muslim community. The murīds live in houses or apartments which are located among the non-Muslim inhabitants of Waterport. Fifteen children of murīds, many of whom were in their late 20s or early 30s at the time of this study, have taken intisāb. Of the survey research respondents, nearly one-third (28%) were children of murīds. Only two individuals raised outside of the Sufi community, including myself, took intisāb in the five years prior to this research, strongly implying that the tariqa was not focused on increasing membership though new individuals. Instead of seeking out new members, the community assumed interested individuals would be spiritually guided to the tariqa. In the two years following the data collection for this study, the number of murīds in

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53 Telephone communication with a murīd, August 25, 2010. In the 1990s, Shaykh Asaf lived in Saudi Arabia for two years and rarely visited Waterport.

54 Shaykh Asaf is the only one currently who initiates interested individuals into the Alami Tariqa, a process which occurred quickly for many of the early murīds, but presently involves at least one year of observation.
Waterport increased by six individuals. These new members were mostly adult children of *murīds*, but also included a *murīd’s* spouse who embraced Islam and joined the ṭariqa.

As discussed in the introduction, this ṭariqa is distinguished by its diversity of membership. Amongst the *murīds* living in or near Waterport, there were nearly equal numbers of men (28) and women (24). The largest ancestral background represented is European (53 percent), followed by African (39 percent) (see Table 2.1). Thirteen percent noted having Jewish ancestry. From greatest to least in numbers, they were born in the United States, Canada, South Asia, Germany, and Scandinavia.

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ancestral Background</th>
<th>Percentage of Murids</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are the ancestral backgrounds as self-reported by 32 individuals. Three declined to answer this question. There is overlap as many indicated more than one ancestry.

The *murīds* had very diverse religious backgrounds as well. The survey responses representing the population of *murīds* revealed that about 50 percent were raised Christian, 16 percent had Jewish religious backgrounds, and 33 percent were born and raised Muslim. On the survey, several *murīds* additionally mentioned having previous affiliations with New Age, Eastern, and a Native American religion. Nearly one-third of *murīds* (29 percent) who were raised non-Muslim embraced Islam prior to joining the ṭariqa. As a result of this religious diversity, it is not uncommon for the families in Waterport to represent more than one religious heritage.

Among the ṭariqa members, educational rates are very high (see Table 2.2). A majority (84 percent) of the *murīds* have achieved a two-year college Associates degree or higher (see Table 2.2). Twenty-five percent of the survey respondents reported having earned graduate degrees, including three (9 percent) with doctoral level degrees and two (6 percent) who completed postdoctoral studies. At the time of my research, seven *murīds* were pursuing graduate studies. Only one *murid* indicated not completing High School or its equivalent, the GED. Similarly, Theodore Gabbay (1988, 199) surveyed 131 Sufi adherents in California and found that nearly 80 percent had earned an Associate’s degree.

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55 These estimates are based on the sample from my research of 38/53 *murīds*.
or higher. This, though, is in contrast to Freidberg’s (1994, 116-118, cited in Hermansen 2000) study, which found that among the Naqshbandi-Haqqani members, almost half of the 57 respondents reported only having obtained a High School education. This discrepancy is likely connected to the personal characteristics of the Sufi practitioners, particularly the large number of immigrants within the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa who may have less formal education compared to the Americans who join Sufi movements.

Table 2.2
EDUCATION LEVELS OF ALAMI MURIDS IN WATERPORT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage of Murids who Achieved This as Highest Degree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did not finish high school</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s Degree</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate Degree</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postdoctoral Study</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The murīds were asked to mark their highest completed school degree. These are the results from 32 responses. Three did not answer the question.

Shaykh Asaf is a proponent of seeking knowledge regarding both religious and worldly affairs. This is similar to the approach of South Asian Pir Wahhab Siddiqi to acculturation in Britain, who saw the success of Islam largely dependent upon Muslims “becoming both materially successful and capable of promoting their faith in the midst of a secular and religiously pluralist society” (Geaves 2009b, 68). Shaykh Asaf considers it imperative for the tariqa members, particularly the community leaders, to be well-versed in secular and religious knowledge. The high number of educational degrees among the Alami murīds is likely associated with both his encouragement of higher education and a natural inclination for intellectual pursuits among tariqa members, since the desire for intellectual spiritual knowledge ranked in the top five reasons for joining this tariqa (see Table 4.1).

Since Waterport is in a rural area, the main local sources of income are farming and transportation. However, the tariqa members are involved in varied professions which reflect a tendency to pursue higher education. The three most common professions are student, teacher, and counsellor. Refer to Table 2.3 below for a sampling of jamā’a
members’ (including non-

\textit{murīds}) professions, which range widely from practicing medicine to architectural design. Several members listed more than one profession. Although there was a general sense that most \textit{murīds} experienced financial difficulty, none spoke openly about this, and income was not discussed on the survey or during the interviews.\footnote{Regardless of low income levels, Orleans County was documented as paying the highest percent of taxes on home values in the nation from 2006-2008 (Tax Data 2009).}

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{PROFESSIONS OF ALAMI COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN WATERPORT}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Professions of the Alami Community Members} & \textbf{Total} \\
\hline
Student & 8 \\
Teacher & 7 \\
Counsellor & 7 \\
Caregiver & 5 \\
Housewife & 4 \\
Business Management & 4 \\
Healthcare Professionals & 3 \\
Computer Science & 2 \\
Autoworker & 2 \\
Hard Sciences (engineering, molecular biology) & 2 \\
Athletic Trainer & 1 \\
Fire Fighter & 1 \\
Architect & 1 \\
Sales Associate & 1 \\
Loss Mitigation Processor & 1 \\
Federal Census Bureau Recruiter & 1 \\
Carpenter/Woodworker & 1 \\
Photographer & 1 \\
Seamstress & 1 \\
Attorney & 1 \\
Pottery Artist & 1 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\label{table:professions}
\end{table}

This sampling of professions includes 47 \textit{jama\'a} members, most of whom are \textit{murīds}. Several self-reported more than one profession.

\textit{Activities}

The Sufi community uses three main buildings in Waterport. Most importantly, the \textit{tekiya} is the religious centre. Situated on a slight hill and surrounded by lilac trees and apple orchards, the \textit{tekiya} resembles a spiritual retreat. The community has plans to build
a mosque in the field behind the tekiya and dedicated a rock from Shaykh Ibn al-Arabi’s tomb as the corner stone in the summer of 2008, but construction has yet to begin on this project. When not in use by adult education and orphan projects, the WLIEC, also called the “School,” is used for community purposes such as dinners, wedding receptions, and an occasional lecture or presentation. A third building which is important for the tariqa community is found overlooking Lake Alice in Waterport. It was previously known as the khūnaqāh and currently is called the “Clinic” because it was most recently used as a doctor’s office to provide medical treatment to the participants of the Project Life orphan rehabilitation program and, when financially possible, individuals without health insurance.

There is also a “Dream Room” in which the murīds’ dreams are kept carefully organised in written form. Dreams are considered to provide clarity on the spiritual progress of an individual, and dream interpretation is particular to the Khalwati Tariqa (Trimingham 1971, 158). It is strictly forbidden to read another’s dreams, except by the shaykh, who uses them to gauge and facilitate his murīds’ progress. The keeper of the dreams collects the written dreams and files them into designated boxes. The Dream Room is locked and protected by an oath of restraint which serves to protect this private information. Reviewing one’s own dreams is encouraged, but rarely done because this does not appear to be a priority of most of the murīds, and it is often difficult to interpret the dreams without Shaykh Asaf’s insight.

The Muslim prayer service, jum`a, is held weekly on Fridays at the tekiya with between 20 to 30 individuals attending. Although welcome, Muslims from outside the Sufi community rarely visit the tekiya. This is likely because of several factors. First, as a Sufi house of prayer, the tekiya has a different purpose than a mosque, and this community has not actively invited other Muslims into the small, semi-private building. Second, there are not many Muslims in the local area, and they are most likely attending jum`a at mosques in nearby cities, including Rochester and Buffalo. Third, other Muslims may be hesitant to attend a worship service hosted at the Sufi tekiya due to pre-conceived differences of theological approaches regardless that this community follows the Hanafi madhhab.
In the summer of 2009, the ṭarīqa community had unique visitors for jumʿa. The Amir ud Deen (leader of faith) and three members of the Tablighi Jamaʿat visited Waterport from Buffalo, located approximately 80 kilometres away. The Tablighi Jamaʿat is known for their strictness in faith and correct Islamic behaviour, and they are not known for frequently visiting Sufi places of worship. Dressed in Pakistani shalwar qameez and having thick beards, the appearances of the Tablighi Jamaʿat members contrasted with the mostly black, Western outfits and clean-shaven or short beards of the men in the ṭarīqa.

As the Tablighi members approached the tekiya, they were greeted by a member of the ṭarīqa who showed them the facilities for making wudu, the ritual cleansing required before praying. In preparation for jumʿa, Shaykh Asaf was reciting the Qurʾan to those gathered, and after the visitors settled, he motioned for one of them to continue reciting the Qurʾan in his place. As the Tablighi member began, his voice lifted and grew stronger, being carried by the inner melody. A little while later, the service began, and after a short sermon by an imām of the ṭarīqa community, the Amir ud Deen was asked to speak. Sitting in front of the men, he punctuated the importance of doing good deeds,

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57 The local Tablighi Jamaʿat is aware that Shaykh Asaf is a personal friend with amirs of Tablighi Jamaʿat and has attended several world gatherings (ijtema) including in Australia and the Fiji Islands.
following the *sunna* of the Prophet Muhammad, and striving to earn one’s way into heaven. This focus on personal strictness and effort was noted and appreciated by the *tariqa* members. Following the sermon, the Tablighi members performed the prayer shoulder-to-shoulder with the other men, demonstrating their acceptance of the *tariqa* community as Muslims. Out of respect for the visitors, Shaykh Asaf had quietly requested that the women pray in the adjoining room instead of in their usual row behind the men, a suggestion which was acted upon in good faith. The Tablighi and *tariqa* communities interacted easily after the service while sharing in a light meal on the porch of the *tekiya*.

There are several other weekly and annual activities in Waterport. These include weekly communal recitation of the *wird*, a collection of Qur’anic verses and traditional readings significant to the *tariqa*, by the *murids* on Thursday afternoons at the *tekiya*. The annual fast during the month of Ramadan is also observed, with *tarawih* (20 repetitions of *sunna* prayers) completed nightly at the *tekiya*. The Muslim holidays of Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are celebrated, the latter with sacrifices of *gurbān* (unblemished sheep) done in Waterport by the *murids* in commemoration of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son. This is followed by a worship service at the *tekiya*, and a meal hosted usually at the School. Mawlid an-Nabi (Prophet Muhammad’s birthday) and Sultan Newrooz (Imam Ali’s birthday) are remembered modestly through recitation of the Qur’an, special readings, and extra prayers. Also, the Muslim New Year is noted but not celebrated because of its timing with the commemoration of Ashura, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, his family, and his companions.
Ever since Ashura was introduced by Shaykh Jemali in the mid-1980s, as discussed earlier, it has been very important for the Alami Tariqa. The community members gather every evening over the 10-day period to listen to talks by Shaykh Asaf or one of the other shaykhs of Waterport discussing the events and their wider implications. The murids voluntarily participate in self-denial of comforts during this time including daily fasts, keeping to a strict vegetarian diet, substituting clear water with slightly bitter beverages usually of diluted juice or tea, exercising patience and harmonious relations, and not partaking in excessive entertainment. These practices are done in an attempt to relate to the suffering experienced by Imam Hussein and Ahlel Bayt (the family of Prophet Muhammad). They come from the Balkan Sufi traditions passed down through Shaykh Asaf’s silsila, particularly the Rifa’i Tariqa. These 10 days are a time of mourning, offering prayers for forgiveness, and refocusing one’s life on submission to God.

During commonly-practiced holidays in America, such as New Year’s Eve and Christmas, the murids are encouraged to go to the tekiya, perform additional prayers, say dhikr, recite the Qur’an, and be in the company of other murids. This is interpreted by the murids to help them remain focused on the remembrance of God and distance them from the material aspects of these cultural celebrations. Sometimes the murids visit non-
Muslim family during the holidays, bridging the two cultures and showing respect to other religions. This is generally well accepted, particularly if the holiday is a religious remembrance. An exception is when the holiday interferes with a Muslim holiday. For example, in 2009, Christmas took place during the commemoration of Ashura, and Shaykh Asaf encouraged the murīds to pay attention to their own religious observation above the other. In this way, they are establishing their own identity separate from but within mainstream culture.

Conclusions

The presence of Shaykh Asaf has made a significant contribution to the spread of spiritual Islam in North America. After coming to America in 1969 from the former Yugoslavia, he established the Alami Tariqa in various cities of Canada and the United States. A well-established and traditionally-educated scholar, he transmitted teachings of the inner meaning of Islam based upon historically-recognised Muslim saints dating back to the twelfth century. He has legitimacy in the Khalwati-Hayati and Rifa‘i Tariqas, which are considered to be linked to the time of the Prophet Muhammad by a verifiable chain of succession (silsilā).

The Alami Tariqa has its roots in the second phase of Sufism in America, although its current existence in Waterport, N.Y., delineates the third wave (Webb 2006). This is evident in the way it was approved by other shaykhs from around the world, who visited this community, fulfilling a Sufi tradition known as ziyāra. The visiting shaykhs have included Shaykh Muzaffer of the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa in Istanbul, Turkey; Shaykh Jemali of the Rifa‘i Tariqa in Prizren, Kosovo; Shaykh Ahmed Buyuk, guardian of the mosque and tomb of Shaykh Shams of Tabriz in Konya, Turkey; Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri of South Africa; Shaykh Tahir Yahya and Shaykhha Ana of the Khalwati-Hayati Tariqa of Ohrid, Macedonia; and Shaykh Muhammad Abdul Rauf, an eminent scholar of al-Azhar, Cairo, Egypt; among others. These shaykhs have helped to teach the murīds the correct outer practices and inner meaning of Islam. They have been instrumental in firmly establishing this tariqa and linking it to the global network of Sufi tariqas.

Also, this tariqa has been engaging with issues of existence beyond the first generation which is contained in the tradition of the structural leadership. It is assured by the determination of assignments of duties. This chain descends from the grand shaykh to sub-shaykhs, wakīls, and others with specific duties. In the beginning of the present
century, two American-born *shaykhs* were ordained in Waterport, assuring the *ṭariqā* community has leadership in the coming years.

The adversities encountered by the *ṭariqā* community, including harassment and prejudice, have led to opportunities for interfaith dialogue and engagement with the larger non-Muslim communities. A mutual ground for cooperation and understanding has been the humanitarian outreach of the community through their local and international projects. The interactions that have been established with local and international Christian and Jewish organisations are recognised as important and are planned to continue in the future.

Additionally, the second generation of *murāds*, the children of the initial settlers of the community, are currently engaged in higher academic pursuits including doctorate degrees in anthropology, social work, philosophy and theology of Islam, with one of the *murāds* completing his doctorate at al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt. Upon the completion of their education, most of them anticipate continuing their work from home bases in Waterport, N.Y. This is hoped to assure the continuity of this *ṭariqā*.
CHAPTER THREE

Issues of Acculturation:
Ethnicity, Race and Gender

O Humankind! We have created you from male and female and have made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Truly, the noblest among you before God are the most pious among yourselves. Indeed, God is the All-knowing, the All-seeing.

– Qur’an (49:13)

Since Islam manifests as a complete way of life, it is intimately connected to cultural traditions and self identity. Across the world, interpretations of Islamic ideals and applications of Sufi traditions in regards to ethnicity and gender are diverse and sometimes contradictory. This is evidence of a lively dialogue concerning the appropriate degree of acculturation in local settings and inclusion of women and individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds. The Alami Tariqa has adapted to the American environment and offers to men and women of any ethnic background opportunities for spiritual progress, while striving to uphold the essence of šaфи‘a law.

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the understanding of how Sufi ṭariqas in America have adapted to the pluralistic setting regarding ethnic, racial, and gender issues. The Alami Tariqa’s inclusive approach is presented and situated within the literature. This chapter is largely descriptive, drawing from the formal interviews with Alami murīds and personal observation and experience. After a general introduction of the basic concept of culture, religion, and acculturation, the next section delves into the Alami Tariqa’s internal racial and ethnic dynamics compared to other Sufi movements in the West. This is followed by an exploration of its negotiation of gender issues including the participation of women, leadership roles, dress, and gender relations.
Globalisation has created an environment where ideas and individuals interact on unprecedented levels. Islamic guidance for living is interpreted by the schools of *sharī’a* and then applied with much debate and variation in local settings, as Geertz (1986), for example, found in his study of Islam in Indonesia and Morocco. Local Islamic practices and identities have global dimensions, and likewise the global have local dimensions. This is well demonstrated by studies of transnational *ṭarīqas* (Werbner 2007; Geaves, Dressler and Klinkhammer 2009; Raudvere and Stenberg 2009) and the interactions between various Muslim groups (Westerlund and Rosander 1997; Sirriyeh 1999). Islam in Western settings is characterised by opposing and merging identities as a result of a diverse population and different interpretations of Islam brought into contact by forces of globalisation.

In academia, there have been many attempts to synthesise these diverse local variations with the concept of a universal Islamic religion. A common approach in the social sciences was to dichotomise Islam into local and global projections, such as Robert Redfield’s (1960) conceptualisation of a “Great Tradition” and “Little Traditions,” which was notably used by Gellner (1981). Other popular categories propose that the masses practice “folk” Islam compared to the “pure” Islam of the scholars, or “popular” religion which is contrasted to the “textual” religion (Rahman 1979; Norris 2006). Levtzion (1979, 1) comments that various “local” forms of Islam should be approached as variations of a “world” religion. These distinctions tend to oversimplify the intricate relationships between the local and global, urban and rural contexts, and they are limited in their applicability to contemporary expressions of Sufism.

More useful than dichotomies for this study are theories which acknowledge the interconnectedness between the local and the global. Robertson (1995, 29-30, 32) recommends that globalisation should be understood to involve the “reconstruction” of the local in new settings and that local traditions are found “in the global.” He uses the term “glocalisation” in an endeavour to remove the notion that “local assertions [are] against globalising trends” (emphasis in original) (1995, 29). An alternative approach is suggested by Pieterse (1995, 45), who asserts that the focus should be on “hybridisation which gives rise to a global mélange.” This is in contrast to those who see a globalisation trend toward homogeneity and standardisation, such as proposed in Benjamin Barber’s (1995) *Jihad vs. McWorld*. Likewise, Nederveen Pieterse (2009, 4) expands on the
concept that cultural hybridisation is occurring, creating “translocal mélange cultures,” and leading toward a post-hybridisation era.

Scholars have demonstrated this complex interaction of the “global” and “local.” Peter Beyer (2009) presents two examples of young Canadian women, who practice Islam differently because of their ethnic backgrounds and personal approaches. He states that Islam is “both global and local at the same time; any variation can be global only as a series of localised forms ... the authentic variations [of religions] are not only plural, they are located both at the centres and at the margins or at neither” (Beyer 2009, 14).

On the other hand, Olivier Roy (2004) notes that, as part of globalisation, Islamic neo-fundamentalists are constructing a “de-culturised” Islam, or a universal religious identity which can theoretically be applied in any local setting. Thus, a locally-conceived identity is becoming “global” and then “local” again as this new identity is accepted and internalised in communities around the world. This can be seen in the advertisement of *halāl* food at fish and chips restaurants and the promotion of local dress codes to international markets, which are then adopted in different local settings.¹ By focusing on the interaction of local and global contexts, it is easier to understand the acculturation of the Alami Tariqa, which consists largely of individuals who were not raised Muslim and, therefore, who draw from “glocal” applications of Islam.

Travelling Sufis who establish lodges in non-Islamic lands have often been recognised for adapting to the local setting and then implementing a slow process of “Islamisation” (Levtzion 1979; Voll 2007, 289). This gradual adjustment, which finds support among the *ḥadīth* and *sunna*, is flexible enough to allow the incorporation of certain non-Islamic customs in the practice of Islam (*urf*), thus inadvertently creating hybrids and encouraging distinct local identities. Over time, more Islamic practices are implemented. Islamisation leads to the localisation of Islam in the new setting. Alternatively, Sufi movements may retain their initial levels of acculturation, as did Inayat Khan’s because he considered Americans not to be suited for traditional Islamic Sufism (Jironet 2009). In addition, Sufi tariqas, particularly those consisting of mostly recent immigrants, may undergo gradual adaptations over time because of interactions with American society.

The process of adjustment to the non-Muslim setting has been referred to in various ways including hybridisation (Pieterse 1995, 45; Hermansen 2000), inculturation, as was popularised by Christianity (Westerlund 2004), and acculturation (Hermansen

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¹ This can be observed in Bosnia where many young Muslim women are wearing *hijābs* although their mothers are not.
1991), which is used in this study. Acculturation, according to the Dictionary of the Social Sciences, refers to “the adoption of new cultural patterns following contact between groups” (Calhoun 2002, 2). It commonly signifies the normative effect of the dominant culture and language on immigrants. Hermansen (1991) uses it to describe both the ways in which religious teachings and the appearance of a religion come to reflect the new environment and how the newly-involved individuals likewise adapt to the religion.

Acculturation refers to adapting on two levels: the institutional and individual. Concerning institutions, the ṭariqa and religious teachings reflect elements of the new environment to a greater or lesser extent. On the individual level, the immigrant participants adapt themselves to the environment and any changes introduced to the ṭariqa following the migration. Also, the new Western participants adapt to the religion and ṭariqa organisation. Hermansen (1991, 188) describes acculturation at the level of the individual as the “process of confronting a new cultural context and worldview and having to choose where to adapt to aspects of that context and worldview in one’s own life.” Inevitably, it is a negotiation between the old and the new, personal choice and group membership.

The process of acculturation is related to the opposing process of Islamisation, which describes the personal transformation into a Muslim in both action and intention. It typically occurs after consciously dedicating one’s life to Islam. Rambo and Farhadian (1999, 23) identify it as a type of religious conversion which involves an “intensifying of religious beliefs and practices,” and it may occur for those who were born and raised Muslim as well as those who embraced Islam later in life. Islamisation can also be used to describe an institution’s process of gradualism, or moving closer to upholding the šari‘a law. It is common for traditional ṭariqas that attract a significant number of previously non-Muslim members to initially undergo a large degree of acculturation which is decreased over time in favour of a more Islamic approach. This occurs as the adherents become more in tune with Islam and better prepared for spiritual progress in Islamic Sufism.

While most of the literature on Sufism in the West touches on the subject of acculturation, the most useful references for this exploration of approaches to gender and ethnicity among Sufis in America are Hermansen’s writings. In particular, these include Two-Way Acculturation (1991), In the Garden of American Sufi Movements (1998), Hybrid Identity Formations (2000), and Sufism and American Women (2006b). Other sources provide information on specific ṭariqas, such as Abdullah’s (2009) article on

There are many examples of Islamic *tariqas* in the West which have eased their new Sufi communities into the formal practice of Islam. Theodore Gabbay (1988, 140) notes that Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak, of the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa, allowed his American *murīds* to “work up” to fully practicing Islam, such as by encouraging them to initially pray two of the five daily prayers. Likewise, Webb (1994, 82-84) comments that Bawa Muhaiyaddeen did not instigate the Islamic prayers among his Philadelphia Sufi community until 10 years after his arrival. In addition, Shaykh Nazim of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa is documented by Geaves (2000, 149) as allowing new Muslims “to develop according to their capacity and desire to embrace their new faith.”

The very early *murīds* of the Alami Tariqa came from a counter-culture, alternative spiritualities background and were drawn to Shaykh Asaf while he was in Canada as a spiritual teacher. They were initially unaware of his grounding in Islam because he taught in a way that was familiar for the Western psyche and did not use an Islamic vocabulary.\(^2\) He also asked them to call him by his first name without any titles of honour. Although Shaykh Asaf was involved with the local mosques in Toronto, particularly the Croatian one, and met with these early *murīds* in Islamic centres, the formal religion was not discussed until they were with him for about six months. During Ramadan, he sent his *murīds* to the mosque for the evening *tarāwīh* prayers, advising them to replicate the others’ actions.

Not long after, Shaykh Asaf administered the *shahāda* to his *murīds* and sent them on pilgrimages: two of them went to Mecca for the *ḥāji*, then to Turkey, and Macedonia, and a third went to Jerusalem.\(^3\) While in Turkey, the local *imāms* instructed the new Muslims on how to pray and recite the Qur’an. Meanwhile, Shaykh Asaf moved to America and became the *imām* for the greater Rochester Muslim community, eventually

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\(^2\) Interview with “Amir,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\(^3\) Although there were a few more *murīds* at that time, only three remain involved in the Waterport community. A couple others live in Canada, but they are only remotely involved in the *tariqa* community.
drawing more Americans to the *tarīqa*. From this point on, Shaykh Asaf required individuals who were interested in the *tarīqa* to formally embrace Islam before becoming *murīds*. All requirements of Muslims were expected of his *murīds*, and the five daily prayers were described as being the “basis of Islam.” It was also around this time that he requested his *murīds* to call him by his title of *shaykh*. One of the *murīds* recalled that by September 1977, when she became involved, the *tarīqa* community was praying the formal prayers. Over the subsequent nearly four decades, Shaykh Asaf further introduced gradual changes, transitioning the *tarīqa* community closer to traditional Islam of the Hanafi *madhhab*.

Although taking the *shahāda* is required before joining the Alami Tariqa, Shaykh Asaf allows for a gradual approach regarding many issues on the individual level. I embraced Islam the weekend before Ramadan in 2004. Although I tried to keep the fast, I found it very demanding and was unable to keep the restrictions the majority of days. Most of this time was spent in close proximity to Shaykh Asaf, and he was fully aware that I was eating during the day. Neither he nor any of the other *murīds* present put pressure on me or made me feel guilty. The following year, I was successful in my intention to fast the month. Another example is in regards to my clothing. For the first two years of being Muslim, Shaykh Asaf took little notice of my outfits, which usually involved short-sleeve shirts and sometimes shorts during the summer months. It was not until the summer of 2006 that he encouraged me to wear modest, long sleeved shirts and trousers or skirts to my job, where I was representing Islam. He also recommended draping a scarf around my shoulders. Since then, this type of modesty has been expected.

There are certain issues on which Shaykh Asaf does not allow a gradual approach. Much to the quiet disappointment of a young man who took the *shahāda* in 2011, Shaykh Asaf instructed him not to go to swimming pools which also allow women, a teaching that the others also most likely received after embracing Islam. Likewise, dating, visiting night clubs, and drinking alcohol are strictly forbidden by Shaykh Asaf. Smoking is also prohibited since it is viewed as a chemical addiction, but several *murīds* have yet to break that attachment (see Chapter Five). It is the individual *murīd*’s responsibility to follow Shaykh Asaf’s advice, and he gives everyone the freedom of choice. He tells them his judgment on issues based on the *shafr*a and *ijtihad* (interpretation), but he does not often act as “a policeman.” It is at times like this that the *murīds* are reminded that the *bayānah*...

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4 E-mail communication with a *murīd*, May 29, 2011.
5 Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
(allegiance)\textsuperscript{6} is between the murīd and God, and the shaykh is only there to help those who are willing to make spiritual progress.

Before proceeding into the specific sections on ethnicity and gender, it should be noted that these subjects are considered unimportant by the Alami murīds. This approach is based on the belief that all souls were created with the same ability to develop a relationship with God regardless of the body’s physical features. As one murīd expressed, “We were all made equal. There are many flowers in God’s garden.”\textsuperscript{7}

Within this ṭariqa, focusing on the physical differences between people is considered an indication of a personal attachment which blinds one’s awareness of the Truth of equality and hinders spiritual progress. For example, if someone is upset that women are not allowed to lead community prayers, the individual is encouraged to explore the underlying reasons for the irritation. Does it actually matter who leads the prayer since everyone in the prayer line is praying to God? Shouldn’t the focus be on God instead of personal ambitions? The Prophet Muhammad did not discriminate against women, so is there another reason for this established tradition that cannot be understood at the moment? Letting go of the emotionally-driven focus frees the individual to have a more balanced perspective and struggle with the underlying personal issues (jihād al-nafs) which inspire the attachment. While honouring the insider perspective, this chapter intends to interact with the established literature and present the contemporary approach of the Alami Tariqa.

Ethnicity and Race

The diasporic nature of transnational ṭariqas often results in ethnic and racial identity acting as critical components in their acculturation to Western societies. While religion in America is not usually strongly associated with ethnic identity, religious communities tend to be differentiated based on racial and ethnic characteristics.\textsuperscript{8} This is also found within some Muslim religious communities, particularly when a mosque doubles as a cultural centre, serving to preserve an ethnic identity. Among Sufi movements, ethnicity often plays a significant role in their identities due to the

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\textsuperscript{6} Allegiance taken at the time of joining the ṭariqa.

\textsuperscript{7} Personal communication with “Fatima,” May 16, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.

\textsuperscript{8} In America, religions are not usually distinguished by ethnic origins, although an exception is Judaism. Religious conversion is relatively common, contributing to religious communities that are ethnically diverse.
established connections to the homelands of the *shaykh* and recent immigrants and the retention of cultural practices. Individuals are drawn to that which is familiar, often furthering a homogeneous identity of the *tarīqa* in the new setting through ongoing immigration and by drawing from established ethnic populations in the West. In this way, the local identity goes global and then becomes localised again (Beyer 2009, 14). The involvement of individuals of diverse ethnicities and races in Sufi *tarīqas* often challenges established customs retained from the homeland. This necessitates evaluating cultural and institutional norms, confronting stereotypes and prejudices, and negotiating a hybrid identity.

**Common Approaches to Ethnicity and Race**

Based on Hermansen (1998, 155; 2000) and Geaves’ (2000, 72) typologies presented in Chapter One, Sufi movements in the West can be organised into three ideal-type categories according to their approach to ethnicity and acculturation: 1) Islamic *tarīqas* which acculturate minimally to the Western setting and have mostly homogeneous, immigrant-based ethnic compositions, 2) Sufi movements which espouse perennial beliefs and have mostly homogeneous, Caucasian ethnic compositions, and 3) *tarīqas* which acculturate at least a little to the Western setting and consist of ethnically diverse members.

The first category, which Hermansen (2000) identifies as the transplant Sufi movements, refers to *tarīqas* which mostly consist of recent Muslim immigrants. They hold allegiance to a *tarīqa* from their homeland and sometimes invite a *shaykh* to travel to the West and act as their local *tarīqa* leader. For these communities, ethnic identity and cultural background are paramount, and they try to imbue the new setting with symbols from their homeland. An example is the Albanian Bektashi Tariqa in Detroit, Michigan, which was established after Baba Rexheb (d. 1995) arrived in the immigrant community in the early 1950s (Trix 1994, 367). When visiting the Bektashi *tekiya*, Francis Trix observed the numerous photographs of Albanian patriots, which were indicative of the importance of Albanian identity for this *tariqa* community. Baba Rexheb taught that “Love of country comes from faith” (Trix 2009, 9). In other words, by supporting their homeland, they were defending their right to practice Islam. As of Trix’s writings in 1994, the *murīds* were all Albanian immigrants, except for two who had been born in America.
Also included in this category are the tarīqas known as shrine cults because of being structured around the veneration of a deceased shaykh or wali allah (saint, friend of God). In new settings, these tarīqas strive to retain their ethnic identity by upholding cultural norms from their homeland and creating new sacred space that is symbolically linked back. They often perform regular pilgrimages to the saint’s shrine to renew their connection to the tarīqa and receive baraka (blessings) from the shaykh (Geaves 2009a, 99). While these ethnically-uniform tarīqas may attract a few converts of different ethnicities, they typically remain on the outskirts of influence while the leadership is passed down among the descendants of the saint, and power is held by the established members of the community. This type of tarīqa is particularly common amongst South Asian and African diaspora communities.

Sufi movements which resemble shrine cults are much more common in Britain than in America. Geaves (2000, 117) identifies these in Britain as “the typical institutional pattern for an individual branch of the tarīqa.” In contrast, this form of Sufi community is rare in America, as Hermansen (2004, 42) states: “The transplantation of South Asian pirs and their disciples, as has occurred in the British Midlands, is ... absent from the American Sufi scene.” She attributes this mostly to the higher educational and socio-economic levels of Muslim immigrants to the U.S. and their tendency to distance themselves from popular culture and superstitious religious practices.

However, one example of a contemporary shrine cult in America is the Murid Sufi Movement, started by Shaykh Amadou Bamba in Senegal in the late 1800s (Abdullah 2009, 200). A substantial number of Murid adherents are emigrants from Senegal belonging to the Wolof ethnic group (Dressler 2009, 82). They symbolically sacralise the streets of New York City by holding an annual Shaykh Amadou Bamba Day parade to honour their tarīqa’s founding shaykh. Participation in the celebratory activities, which last for nearly two weeks prior to the parade, is believed to be a way of receiving baraka from the saint (Abdullah 2009, 226). Although Dressler (2009, 82) reports that some African Americans have joined this tarīqa and notes hearing about a few Caucasian

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9 “Saint” is the typical translation of “wali allah” (friend of God) although it confuses and contradicts the Arabic meaning since saint “implies intrinsic holiness or sanctity as a personal quality” and is given to an individual in Catholicism after a vigorous evaluation and often many centuries after his or her death (Ernst 1997, 59). Wali’ allah, in contrast, refers to highly-respected, saintly individuals who may be dead or alive.

10 This Sufi movement is also called the Mouride or Mourid movement, and the shaykh’s name may also be spelled Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba.

11 The estimated number of Murid adherents living in New York City ranges between 1,000, as Dressler (2009, 82) estimated, and 2,500, according to Abdullah (2009, 200). Estimates of the total number of Murids in America range between 4,000 and 6,000 (Malcomson 1996, 30).
converts, the Murid movement largely consists of West African immigrants, and leadership is passed down among the family members of the saint.

Individuals of other ethnicities who join these transplant Sufi movements often face sizeable challenges. Coming from very different cultural backgrounds, those who embraced Islam may find it overwhelming to understand the significance of cultural activities and how they relate to Islam. With their questions, they may inadvertently challenge the established structures of the ṭariqa, which can be particularly unsettling for immigrants already feeling threatened by the foreign, non-Muslim environment which may lead to tensions in the community. The strong focus on the country of origin may also overshadow critical new issues facing the immigrants and converts. Since these ṭariqas are led by individuals with strong connections to the homeland, converts often find it difficult to impact the leadership or be accepted as equal participants in the ṭariqa. On the other hand, converts are often highly valued as proof of the success of Islam in the new environment (Geaves 2009a, 101).

The focus on preserving ethnic identity by these ṭariqas promotes Sufism as a cultural movement. It limits the ability of Sufism to acculturate to various settings and attract new individuals. This is particularly relevant when the diaspora Sufi communities are further divided amongst themselves by placing strong emphasis on a specific shaykh and his branch of a ṭariqa. Pnina Werbner (1996, 331) and Ron Geaves (2000, 117) state that it takes a living, charismatic shaykh to reinvigorate Sufism and transcend cultural barriers.

The second category of Sufi movements includes those which uphold Sufism as universal spirituality and separate it from its Islamic roots. Hermansen (1998, 155) identifies them as the perennials. The adherents of these Sufi movements consist mostly of Caucasians and rarely include Muslim immigrants, likely due to the decreased focus on Islam (Hermansen 2004, 43). This universal approach to religion is particularly appealing for Westerners who may be uncomfortable with formal conversion to Islam, but it discourages the involvement of Muslims who strive to uphold šarī‘a law. Examples of these Sufi movements include the Society for Sufi Studies of Idries Shah and the Sufi Order of the West led by Vilayat Khan.

Inayat Khan, in the early 1900s, perceived that Americans were disillusioned by established religions and searching for something else, but they were unprepared for Islamic Sufism. Therefore, he adapted his presentation of Sufism to reflect the environment, emphasising it as a universal spirituality or the “religion of the heart” (Genn
Further inspired by the Western environment and adherents, he changed the organisational structure to be a democratic incorporation with an executive committee and international and national councils for various activities. In this structure, the *shaykh* (or *Pir-o-Murshid*) acts as the Representative General and continues to give guidance to the *murīds*, although he or she has limited ability to steer the organisation without consent from the committees and councils. The changes that Inayat Khan instigated make his Sufi order dramatically different from traditional *tariqas*. As Genn (2007, 266) comments, “the combination in this Sufi order of a modern formal transnational voluntary organisation with a charismatic monarchical model of spiritual authority creates a dualism of principle that has never been entirely resolved.” Likely due to these novel ideas and subsequent changes under the leadership of Vilayat Khan, the Sufi Movement International in America appeals mostly to Caucasians, particularly those of the counter-culture (Geaves 2004, 142).

Finally, the third category of Sufi movements are those which attract ethnically-diverse adherents, which corresponds with Hermansen’s (1998, 155) concept of hybrid Sufis. These contrast with both the diaspora *tariqas*, by breaking away from being solely a cultural movement, and the perennial Sufi movements, by retaining a connection to Islam and accommodating, at least somewhat, to the Western environment. Typically, the hybrid *tariqas* are established by immigrant *shaykhs*, and they draw a combination of Caucasian and African Americans and recent immigrants (Hermansen 2000). Examples of the hybrid *tariqa* movements in America include the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa led by Shaykh Hisham, Shaykh Asaf’s Alami Tariqa, the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa led by Shaykh Tosun Bayrak, and the Nimatullahi Tariqa led by Dr. Alireza Nurbakhsh. Each declares its adherence to Islam but has acculturated uniquely according to its distinctive circumstances.

**The Role of Ethnicity in Positioning Sufism in America**

Ethnicity has often aided in the grounding of Sufism in the American setting by encouraging its acceptance in mainstream culture, while other times it has furthered its image as a foreign phenomenon. Transplant Sufi movements, in particular, often reinforce Sufism as being a foreign religious movement by discouraging interaction with Western society. In the case of Baba Rexheb’s Bektashi Tariqa in Detroit, it discourages
acculturation through use of their native language and support of Albanian nationalistic causes. It also tends to view inter-racial marriages as a “threat” (Trix 1994, 373).

Alternatively, țariqaș which welcome American participants help to promote Sufism as an indigenous, local movement. African Americans often consider Islam to be part of their ethnic and cultural heritage and, therefore, may be drawn to join Sufi movements which uphold sharia. The Tijani Tariqa in America is a prime example of this since it consists of African Americans (20 percent) and emigrants from Africa (80 percent) (Hermansen 1998, 166). The Alami Tariqa also helps to solidify Sufism as a local occurrence due to its mostly American-born adherents.

Another example is the Murid Sufi Movement, mentioned above, which fosters pride among African Americans through its annual parade in New York City (Abdullah 2009, 199-200). Through this public celebration, the Murids draw attention to their țariqa and actively negotiate their African, Islamic, and American identities. This is done through the waving of both U.S. and Senegalese flags and by linking the shaykh’s discourses on racial equality to the U.S. Civil Rights movement by claiming that Shaykh Bamba indirectly influenced Martin Luther King Jr. (Abdullah 2009, 207-209). This situates Sufism in the common discourse of African empowerment and the struggle against racial oppression, which is familiar to Americans. Interestingly, Sufism’s contemporary role in drawing Americans to Islam also has “the effect of legitimising Sufism as a source of spreading Islam in the eyes of certain immigrant Muslims” (Hermansen 1998, 170).

The Alami Tariqa’s Approach to Ethnicity

Identity

As previously discussed, the Alami Tariqa in Waterport consists mostly of Americans with European and African ancestral backgrounds and a few first-generation emigrants from South Asia, Europe, and Scandinavia. Regardless of this internal diversity, the țariqa community prefers to portray itself as a unified Muslim religious community and does not draw attention to the ethnic differences. This approach is considered to uphold the teachings of the Qur’an concerning the equality of humanity and lessen the focus on distinct cultural traditions.
Frishkopf (2009, 68) notes that Muslim immigrants in the West may feel the need to assimilate with other Muslims in order to appear as a unified community to non-Muslims, which results in less emphasis on cultural-specific practices. While this may be the case in other Muslim communities, this is less applicable to the Alami Tariqa because none of the *murīds* have strong links to cultural Sufi practices. Instead, it consists of Americans and recent immigrants who joined Sufism after meeting Shaykh Asaf. Notably, none of the immigrants from Muslim countries were involved in Sufism prior to moving to America. Therefore, they did not bring with them culturally-entrenched, South Asian, or other forms of Sufism. Also, they had lived in America for several years, married, and generally acculturated to the Western setting prior to becoming involved in the *ṭariqa*. The other first-generation immigrant *murīds* are from Europe and Scandinavia, and their presence adds diversity but does not greatly impact the traditions of the *ṭariqa*.

The approach of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa to ethnicity differs dramatically from the Alami Tariqa’s by encouraging distinct ethnic identities. This *ṭariqa* is much larger than the Alami, and subdividing by ethnic identity is likely considered a practical way of creating smaller communities within the movement. As Nielsen, Draper, and Yemelianova (2006, 113) comment, “When Shaykh Nazim is not visiting, it is the autonomy of the local group that is most characteristic of the *ṭariqa*.” To represent their ethnic origins, the men wear different coloured turbans: African Americans may wear red, Germans – green, and Spanish-speakers – gold (Hermansen 1998, 157). This approach

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12 About five percent of the *murīds* are Sri Lankan, first-generation immigrants.
also likely appeals to recent immigrants because it provides a way to retain some of their ethnic identities and honours their heritages.

Without denying the Balkan culturally roots of the Alami Tariqa, which are applied at the discretion of Shaykh Asaf, the dominant culture in the Waterport țariqa community is American. The murîds have a strong desire to be perceived as a united community regardless of their diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. Referring to the uniqueness of this internal diversity, Rabia\textsuperscript{13} commented:

Because the emphasis is off our unique backgrounds, we kind of blend together in a unique way whereas I think, in dūnyā [the temporal world], if someone tried to put people together from Sri Lanka and African Americans and whatever other groups are among us with the purpose of coming together because of diversity, you would find a lot more division and a lot more attachment to those cultural practices.

This agrees with Hermansen’s (2004, 43) comment that “The idea of transcending racial identity and espousing a progressive stance on race is resonant with many converts to Islam, black and white, and thus present in American Sufi movements.” In support of this position, the Alami murîds call attention to the equality of humankind and speak of the ḥajj as an example of the plurality in Islam. They uphold the concept that no nation was created superior to the others: “If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but [His Plan is] to test you in what He hath given you: So strive as in a race in all virtues” (Qur’an 5:48). As Muhammad\textsuperscript{14} said during the interview, “I don’t see any detraction from the ethnic diversity that is here. I think it’s only positive. It’s about what Islam is ... This community is a microcosm of what Islam is supposed to be.”

A common debate among Sufi movements in America concerns the adoption of foreign customs and how much of this is required to be considered authentic (Hermansen 2000). Shaykh Asaf’s vision of the Alami Tariqa transcends local cultural customs, and he does not promote the establishment of Balkan norms in America. Instead, he encourages a local Muslim identity with global awareness. As Nuri stated during the interview:

Our tradition isn’t Anglo, African, Middle Eastern ... That may be where we came from, but that certainly is not our tradition, and I think that’s what makes us different from cultural Islam ... Because we’re North

\textsuperscript{13} Interview with a murîd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
\textsuperscript{14} Interview with a murîd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
American we have our own ways of seeing things, but we really want to try to be like an arrow to the bull’s eye, the Truth [Islam].

Shaykh Asaf cultivates a local identity, in part, by blending into American society. He wears Western clothing outside the tekiya and speaks in English except when reciting something from his background, such as poetry. He encourages learning, and his personal dedication to it is evident not only in his knowledge of the world’s religions, which appeals to the eclectic murīds in Waterport, but in his awareness of American history and customs, which he integrates into the workings of the țariqa. For example, in the Balkan tradition, men prepare tea and food and serve them during religious functions. However, Shaykh Asaf has changed this tradition to allow the women, who may feel more comfortable than the men, to perform this role. The Balkan traditions mostly come into play during the țariqa practices and ceremonies, which provide the structured and time-honoured foundation for the țariqa (see the section on Ashura in Chapter Five).

Leadership of the Alami Tariqa is appointed by Shaykh Asaf based on numerous factors, and the individuals serving in the various leadership positions are from very different ethnic backgrounds. Of the two men in Waterport who have been initiated as shaykhs by Shaykh Asaf, one is Caucasian and the other is African American. Notably, since there are no murīds in Waterport of a similar ethnicity as Shaykh Asaf this eliminates the potential for disagreements between those of similar and different ethnic backgrounds as the shaykh. Geaves (2000, 131) notes this as a cause of tension among the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa in Britain between the Turks and non-Turks, as Shaykh Nazim is a Turkish-Cypriot. Since Shaykh Nazim models much of his behaviour and dress according to his ethnic background, his murīds who have similar backgrounds and language skills have certain advantages.

It is observed in the literature that individuals who speak fluent Arabic typically act in leadership positions for Muslim communities of mixed ethnicities. In the Alami Tariqa, the select individuals who are native Arabic speakers are involved according to their availability and personalities, but do not dominate the leadership positions. One has been appointed as a wakīl in the community and is the caretaker of the tekiya. He also

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15 Interview with a murīd, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
16 I was aware of only one couple from Bosnia who interacted with the Waterport jamāʿa. They resided in Toronto and visited a few times a year. While Croatians were involved in the early establishment of the țariqa in America, they disassociated themselves from Shaykh Asaf due to holding different opinions of practices, such as the consumption of alcohol.
17 All fluent Arabic speakers in Waterport are native speakers except for one who is presently completing his PhD at al-Azhar University, Egypt.
teaches weekly *tajwīd* classes for interested *murīds*. His natural leadership qualities, along with his knowledge of Arabic and Muslim customs, make him a prime candidate for other opportunities that arise to lead or advise the community. Among the women who are native speakers of Arabic, one teaches several weekly Qur’anic Arabic language classes. Otherwise, the leadership is shared between the appointed *murīds* irrespective of ethnicity.

Shaykh Asaf’s approach to community building allows the *murīds* in Waterport to conceptualise themselves as a unified community regardless of the internal diversity. As Ahmed pointed out during the interviews, “you never see the [*murīds as having*] a different ethnicity or different background or religious upbringing because you see them as Muslims.”

Nuri proposed that the *tariqa*’s ethnic identity resembles “chick pea soup,” with the individuals retaining many of their distinct qualities, but blending into an appealing whole.

*Lack of Shrine Worship*

The homeland of a foreign-born *shaykh* and the grave sites of *shaykhs* in his *silsila* often become pilgrimage destinations. Since physical death is not considered to be the end of life, individuals believe they can interact with the *ruḥ* (soul) of the departed *wali allah* (friend of God, saint) and ask for prayers and intercessions at their graves. This sometimes degenerates into, or is perceived as, worship of the actual tomb. Westerners often consider this to be superstitious and have reduced its practice, illustrating one way acculturation is impacting larger trends within Sufism in the West (Westerlund 2004, 34). Regardless, there are several tomb shrines in America, including Samuel Lewis’ in New Mexico and Bawa Muhaiyaddeen’s in Pennsylvania (Hermansen 1998, 162-163). Also, places in America, called *maqāms*, are being dedicated to *shaykhs*, many of which have never been visited by the *shaykh*. For example, the Haqqani Da’wah Centre in Michigan is dedicated to Shaykh Nazim. These situate the *tariqas* in the American setting by inscribing them with spiritual significance thereby enabling those who cannot travel internationally to visit sacred places.

In the Alami Tariqa, travel is encouraged as a way to expand horizons and grow spiritually, but going on a pilgrimage to the Balkans to visit sacred sites is simply not practiced. The only pilgrimage encouraged by Shaykh Asaf is the *hājj* to Mecca and

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18 Interview with a *murīd*, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
19 Interview with a *murīd*, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
visiting Medina. When asked during the interviews whether it was a priority to visit the Balkans for the purpose of pilgrimage or otherwise, the murīds confirmed that it was not. Several mentioned that they would enjoy visiting the Balkans to meet the shaykhs and visit the locations where Shaykh Asaf studied, but travelling there was not considered necessary or even explicitly beneficial.

Reducing the need for pilgrimages to tomb shrines or other sacred places, Shaykh Asaf promotes a self-empowered approach to prayer. When his murīds approach him with concerns, he often instructs them to perform certain prayers, extra fasting, or dhikr prescriptions. He encourages his murīds to pray for themselves and explains that God chooses which prayers to answer, stating that their prayers are as worthy as his in God’s eyes. By doing so, he reduces reliance on intercession and empowers the individual to develop a personal relationship with God. This is strikingly different from the perceived role of many shaykhs who consider it their central role to intercede on behalf of those who request help.20 When passing by grave sites or shrines, Shaykh Asaf advises to recite the opening verses of the Qur’an (fātih) and to pray for the soul of the deceased.

The relationship between Shaykh Asaf and his homeland is notably different from that of most immigrant shaykhs, and this has likely impacted the tariqa’s relationship to the Balkans. For decades, Communism restricted Shaykh Asaf’s ability to travel. From the time he left the former Yugoslavia in the late 1960s until the fall of Communism in the mid-1990s, Shaykh Asaf was barred from returning to his homeland. This encouraged the tariqa to develop independently and discouraged any strong reliance on sacred symbols located in the Balkans.

Embarking on a journey (hijra) for Islam is considered to be the ultimate test of wali allah. As Werbner (1996, 323, 324) explains: “Whether it is to the land of infidels or into the wilderness, the saint’s journey is a lonely journey, filled with hardship,” and it is through these hardships that the “Muslim saint” becomes endowed with charisma. By travelling to America and successfully establishing an Islamic tariqa among the indigenous population, Shaykh Asaf spiritually matured and proved himself to be a capable and gifted shaykh.

Although unable to visit the Balkans, Shaykh Asaf retained connections with shaykhs in his homeland. As discussed in Chapter Two, several Balkan shaykhs, whom Shaykh Asaf had known for many years, visited the Waterport community in the 1980s

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20 See, for example, Geaves’ (2000, 125) discussion of the late Zindapir, the founding shaykh of the transnational Naqshbandi-Ghamkolvia shrine cult, who was continuously visited in Pakistan by pilgrims with ailments and requests.
and 1990s. In addition, a number of Alami murīds have travelled to the Balkans for purposes of humanitarian aid and to interact with other Sufi communities. These cannot be considered pilgrimages because they lack consistency in destination, frequency, and activities. For example, Amir and another murīd spent nearly three weeks in Kosovo during the Communist rule in the early 1970s with Shaykh Jemali. They travelled throughout Kosovo, Croatia, and Bosnia and returned to America with a poignant sense of what it meant to practice religion discretely while under persecution from the government. In contrast, the purposes of my trips to the Balkans in 2005 and 2007 were to interview orphan children who had participated in Project Life and conduct research for my Master’s thesis on contemporary Balkan Sufism. Visiting the tekiya on Buna River in Hercegovina, one of the places where Shaykh Asaf studied as a murīd, was a highlight but not the focus of my trip.

Cultural Richness

The diversity of individuals in the Alami Tariqa adds richness to this ṭariqa community and serves to develop the mindset of a global citizen. Without needing to travel, this multicultural environment provides opportunities to interact with and learn about a variety of family traditions and methods of thinking. The few who are fluent in Arabic serve important functions by reciting the Qur’an during religious gatherings and teaching Arabic and tajwīd (Qur’anic recitation) to interested community members. Those with Jewish and Christian backgrounds are often called upon by Shaykh Asaf during discussions to provide translations and informal commentary on verses from the Torah and Bible. This approach encourages appreciation of these backgrounds as well as a broader outlook on life.

The murīds have furthered the diversity in Waterport by marrying individuals with dissimilar ethnic and racial backgrounds, including individuals from other countries. There are currently 12 marriages within the Waterport ṭariqa community that span different ethnicities or races. In addition to Caucasian and African American individuals born in America, these include individuals from South Asia, France, Britain, Morocco, Iran, Scandinavia, Turkey, and Chechnya.

The food which is prepared for community gatherings clearly reflects the ṭariqa’s ethnic and cultural diversity. The selection often includes Asian meat and rice dishes,

21 Interview with “Amir,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
corn bread and fried chicken, which is traditionally from Southern America, as well as noodle dishes, salads and desserts. An Afghani teenager who participated in Project Life and remained in Waterport for health reasons is renowned for contributing fresh Afghani fried bread. Chechnyan and Moroccan dishes have also recently appeared on the buffet table because marriages that have brought young Muslim women from these countries to Waterport. Sharing recipes is a favoured pastime of some of the murīds.

This cultural diversity provides opportunities for personal growth and naturally educates against racial prejudice and ethnocentrism. Khateeja expressed that contact with diverse individuals through her involvement in the Alami Tariqa had helped her to be less judgmental of others and function better in other Muslim communities. She commented, “Sometimes I hear people say things like: ‘We don’t need Arabs to teach us Islam,’ which is bigotry. And, I don’t feel threatened in that way.”

Challenges

The cultural and lifestyle differences of the murīds, combined with the physical and emotional closeness of the community members, sometimes results in tensions between murīds. The community was described as being a “fish bowl,” or, as another murīd offered: “It is like having a very, very, tightly knit family that has wire-tapped your house in the best of ways.” Although challenges inevitably arise, the murīds were reluctant to talk about specific examples. Disagreements may occur over differing cultural aspects or characteristics of Islamic practices, priorities in life, or how to raise children. At times, subtle, socially-taught racism may become apparent because of the close interactions. Also, immigrant murīds may not understand the unpleasant significance of racial slurs. For example, “nappy hair” is a descriptive term for some although it could be very offensive for African Americans. However, the murīds spoke of how these challenges do not interfere generally with the familial bond felt between the tariqa members.

These tensions are considered to be opportunities for self-cleansing the nafs because they are often lessons in overcoming selfishness, developing sensitivity toward others, or letting go of attachments. As Shaykh Asaf (2004, 164) notes, “If some people

22 Interview with “Khateeja,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
24 Interview with “Ismail,” September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
have a serious confrontation with each other, there must be a reason, and they must try to resolve it. If they cannot improve, it means they cannot deal with their nafs. And, it means that they cannot be on this path.” The murids act as mirrors to each other, as individuals often do in close living situations. Therefore, disagreements facilitate making progress on the spiritual path by pointing out aspects of the self which “need work.” Knowing yourself and learning to control your nafs is critical to eliminating the self and reaching awareness of the oneness (tawhid) and certainty (yakîn) of God.

Regardless of tensions which may arise, the murids who were interviewed felt strongly that they could call upon any of the community members and receive help immediately. As Ismail described, “If you have a problem, you have dozens of people that are better than a 911 call to instantly be at your house to help you with anything, even if you’re having difficulty with people.” During an interview, Shafiya recalled when her husband was dying and a murid in Waterport drove, without prior notice, four hours to pick them up in Cleveland and bring them to Waterport so they could be with the tarîqa community. Once in Waterport, she spoke with amazement of how the other murids responded to her emergency situation, disregarding their personal commitments. This ultimate caring for one another was considered to be one of the benefits of belonging to a community which is united by belief in God above their individual differences.

Conclusions

Although the Alami Tariqa consists of very distinct ethnic and racial groups, this tarîqa community strives to be a unified whole, upholding the Qur’anic concept of equality among races. Balkan traditions provide the time-honoured structure for the tarîqa, but do not play a major role in the customs of the community. This is likely because Shaykh Asaf has encouraged the development of a local identity without strong ties to the Balkans, and there are no murids in Waterport with a similar ethnic background as the shaykh. The diversity found within this tarîqa is particularly apparent at community dinners, where the food reflects the backgrounds of the participants. This diverse membership naturally serves to educate against prejudice and ethnocentrism by providing opportunities to interact with individuals from various backgrounds and with differing mindsets. Although tensions inevitably occur, they are considered opportunities for spiritual growth and do not usually interfere with the feeling of family that exists in this

25 Interview with “Ismail,” September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
26 Interview with a murid, November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
The next section delves into the Alami Tariqa’s approach to gender issues in Waterport.

Negotiating Gender

The eagerness of American women in the 1900s to join alternative religious movements has led to the derogatory notion of these movements existing on the “whim of women” (Jenkins 2000, 22). In the last decade, women have become the most frequent converts to Islam, surpassing the rate of men (Jawad 2006, 154).\(^{27}\) As women in search of meaningful religious experiences turn to Sufism, their participation sometimes challenges the traditional gender roles and cultural norms of the \(\text{\textit{tariqa}}\).

While female involvement in Sufi movements is not unique to the West, their levels of participation and opportunities for leadership vary depending on the characteristics of the Sufi movements. For centuries, many traditional \(\text{\textit{tariqa}}\)s have been inclusive of both men and women, such as the Bektashi Tariqa (McElwain 2004, 98). Annemarie Schimmel (2003) dedicates a chapter in *My Soul is a Woman* to discuss outstanding Sufi women throughout history. She notes, “It seems that in the early years women were not only female disciples of great Sufi masters, but they also participated in community gatherings devoted to recitations from the Quran and to *dhikr*” (Schimmel 2003, 42). However, the more universal movements tend to allow for more visible female leadership than those adhering to Islamic norms. This has been particularly true within Inayat Khan’s movement in America, which has several female shaykhs (called *shaykhas*).

Although Westerners may be uneasy with differentiation based on gender, they appear to appreciate an increased awareness of and respect for gender differences. As Hermansen (2000) notes, “Islamic traditions such as demonstrating respect for the teacher by standing, deferring to others, and separating males and females are experienced as positive factors” by many Americans. It should be noted that the separation of sexes in Islamic movements is not often meant to demean women, but is usually implemented out of respect for them. Likewise, the tradition of reserving the visible *tariqa* leadership roles for men does not typically reflect on the value placed on female participation. In light of

\(^{27}\) Given the negative media attention focused on women in Islam, the surprising numbers of Western women embracing Islam has inspired research regarding the rationality of their choice and their active role in conversion (McGinty 2006; van Nieuwkerk 2008).
this, Western women involved in Sufism are attempting to “negotiate their understandings of gender roles so as to reflect both traditional authenticity and a contemporary sense of gender justice” (Hermansen 2006b).

While striving to uphold šaфиʿa law, Shaykh Asaf has adapted the Alami Tariqa to better fit this environment and the needs of the Western murīds. Both men and women are encouraged to pursue meaningful life endeavours and are given opportunities for spiritual development, based on the Islamic concept that the soul (rūḥ) is not gendered. As Muhammad voiced during the interview, “If we’re all equal in the eyes of God, what’s the difference what gender He made us? It’s just part of His plan, that’s how He decided to create things so that this earth can function in the way He wants it to function, to perpetuate itself.”28

There is an understanding among the ṭariqa members that men and women are made differently by God and are meant to complement each other, but that one is not valued over the other. The Alami Tariqa may be one of the few šaфиʿa-oriented ṭariqas in the West in which women participate in a majority of the rituals. Shaykh Asaf maintains moderate gender segregation and models and teaches what he considers appropriate behaviour while helping them to spiritually mature on the Sufi path. For example, in adherence to the strict interpretation of šaфиʿa, Shaykh Asaf does not make physical contact with women during the intīsāb ceremony initiating a murīd into the ṭariqa. Gender, though, is not considered to hinder spiritual progress.

Since the Alami Tariqa community is in a non-Muslim setting, it lacks a structured Muslim environment in which the elderly and respected men and women provide guidance and support. While shaykhs visiting over the years have certainly enriched the Waterport Sufi community, Shaykh Asaf has had to adopt various roles to help the community develop. In particular, he has crossed stereotypes to act as both “mother and father” for the murīds by supporting them during their struggles. In addition to being a strong leader and inspiration, he has personally invested in building friendships and the familial atmosphere which is present in Waterport. One of the women recalled that Shaykh Asaf “was there when my son was born. He gave me food in both pregnancies. In my worst times, he’s been very close to me.”29

Taking the time to dedicate himself to both his male and female murīds in this way has built strong bonds of trust and established what is considered to be a healthy approach to gender issues in the American setting.

28 Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
29 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Gender Relations and Participation in the Tariqa

In recognition of Americans being expected to work and interact with both men and women, Shaykh Asaf proactively approaches gender relations by teaching and modelling Islamic *adab* (appropriate behaviour). As Isa pointed out, the degree of gender separation sometimes “depends on the culture or the needs in the culture.”

Since men and women interact freely in American society, it is considered artificial and inappropriate to impose the veil or strictly separate the men from women in Waterport. A female *murīd* rhetorically asked the following concerning other Muslims in Western society:

Why do they [some other Muslims] make such a huge deal of separating the men and women from eating together and from praying near each other and yet they’re out in the parking lot interacting with each other like nothing happened and inviting each other to each other’s homes [and being] friends without ever making those separations?31

In Waterport, men and women talk together in public and gather in mixed groups. As Selma commented, “I think it’s a matter of discipline to be able to mix and control yourself, to handle yourself in a respectful way.”

Although some Muslims, both male and female, may feel more comfortable in a highly segregated environment, it would likely cause discomfort and introduce distraction if implemented in Waterport. This is because rigid segregation typically involves values which are cultural interpretations of the teachings of Islam. Instead of having strict physical separations, Shaykh Asaf models how to act in what is considered an appropriate manner, and his actions serve as a reference for the *murīds*.

During religious activities, a moderate separation between men and women is observed to reduce distractions that are inspired by close proximity of the opposite gender. For example, at the *tekiya*, there is one main entrance through which both men and women enter. Inside, in the *muhabbet* room, where discussions often take place before and after prayers, Shaykh Asaf sits on a small, slightly elevated platform in the northwest corner. The men sit on the floor to the left of Shaykh Asaf, against two walls of the room and in the space directly in front of him. The women sit against the other two walls of the room and in the unoccupied space. If they prefer, the women can sit in the

30 Interview with a *murīd*, September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
31 Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
32 Interview with a *murīd*, September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
adjacent room, but Shaykh Asaf frequently encourages anyone there to join the others inside the *muhabbet* room. No physical barrier is imposed between the men and women.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 3.2. Women sitting inside and outside of the *muhabbet* room in the *tekiya* while listening to the recital of the Qur’an*

In the prayer room, the women pray in a line behind the men. The purpose of this separation is to facilitate concentration on prayer and uphold the dignity of women. This is appreciated by many of the women and is not considered as unequal treatment. Rabia admitted that she would rather not pray in front of men because she would be uncomfortable prostrating, aware that they might unintentionally or intentionally observe her.\(^33\) Several *murīds* indicated during the interviews that it should not matter where someone prays because the focus of the individual should be on connecting to God through the prayer.\(^34\) The physical location should be meaningless as long as it is clean and otherwise appropriate. Ahmed pointed out, “If you start believing that [God] is only

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\(^33\) Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.

in front of the *imām*, that’s when you start thinking that there is a gender problem.” He also suggested that by having the men pray in front, they are acting out the concept of always being ready to protect the community if danger would present itself.

During the *tariqa* activities, women participate fully. For *dhikr*, the participants form a circle with the men on one half and the women on the other. Cushions or empty spaces are left between the two halves to symbolise a partition. The participants typically sit on the floor, and the lights are often dimmed to give greater privacy (see Chapter Five for more on *dhikr*). This set-up is similar for the performance of the *wird* (ritual, traditional *tariqa*-specific prayers and invocations).

This approach to gender separation is more lenient than the contemporary practice among *tariqas* in Bosnia. During my research in Sarajevo in 2007, I witnessed the women praying in designated areas usually in balconies or behind the men. These areas were often separated by either a small railing or by intricate, crisscrossed wood panelling which left small holes through which they observed the men. During the *dhikrs*, women participated privately, usually from the balconies. Also, men and women congregated following the religious services in separate gathering rooms. There was some indication that this was established for the greatest comfort of those present and was not exactly rigid since there was a slight exchange of individuals between the rooms. As a female visitor, I was invited to enter the men’s gathering rooms to interact with the *shaykh*, and other women often accompanied me and were welcomed. This is similarly noted by Hermansen (2006b), who comments that Western women visiting foreign *shaykhs* are often awarded a unique status which allows them to transcend traditional gender roles.

The concession of allowing men and women to participate together for *tariqa* activities has also been enacted by other *shaykhs* in America. The Khalwati-Jerrahi Order has been particularly inclusive of women. Theodore Gabbay (1988, 140) notes that Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak permitted men and women to be in the same room for *dhikr*. In the Nur Ashki Jerrahi branch in Mexico organised by the late Shaykh Nur (Lex Hixon), a woman was permitted to head the community and lead the *dhikr*, but she did not lead the prayers as this would contradict the *sunna* (Hixon 1994, 197). There have also been two females initiated as *shaykhs* (called *shaykhas*) within the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa (Gentile-Koren 2007). The Mevlevi Tariqa is another traditional order which has negotiated gender roles by allowing women to whirl with the men, as was originally practiced during the first three generations of the *tariqa* (Reinhertz 2001, xxii). The

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35 Interview with a *murīd*, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
permission for women to turn in America was originally issued by Suleyman Hayati Dede of Konya, the father of the current leader Postneshin Jelaleddin Loras (Naim 2005, 54). Shakina Reinhertz (2001) documents women of the Mevlevi Tariqa, including her personal experiences whirling in Turkey, in *Women Called to the Path of Rumi*.

Women in the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa tend to play more traditional Islamic roles. Hermansen (2006b) comments that this *tariqa’s* activities are gender segregated. From my own experience, I have seen it happen different ways within the Naqshbandi-Tariqa. When Shaykh Hisham is present, Hermansen’s observations are correct and the women participate in a separate room, but when he is not, the cultural traditions of the community influence the approach to gender issues. The women in this *tariqa* are not awarded formal leadership roles, although the wives of the leaders are highly respected and serve as role models for the other female *murids*.

At times, guests visit the Alami Tariqa who adhere to a stricter separation of genders than is typically practiced in Waterport. In these cases, the *tariqa* members have demonstrated their respect for the visitors and flexibility regarding cultural traditions by adopting a stricter *adab*. For example, when members of the Tablighi Jama‘at were present in 2009, Shaykh Asaf quietly asked the women to pray separately from the men in the *muhabbet* room. They agreed easily, and no objections were voiced. As Amirah later stated, “It doesn’t bother me that the women are separated from the men [as long as they are being given appropriate prayer space and are able to hear the *imām*].”

When the elderly Shaykha Ana of the Khalwati-Hayati Tariqa in Macedonia visited Waterport in 1983, she helped to reinforce the importance of women participating in *tariqa* activities. At that time, several of the female *murids* had young children, and they were trying to find a balance between life inside and outside of the home. She spoke to them about her *shaykh* and how he had valued women’s participation a great deal. He had monetarily compensated them for attending the *tariqa* activities so that financial difficulty would not prevent them from coming. Rabia, in particular, recalled being very touched at hearing this, and it helped her to prioritise active participation in the *tariqa*.

When a funeral occurs for a Muslim sister or brother in Waterport, women play a more minor role than the men out of respect for Islamic tradition. They are permitted to attend the service, unlike in stricter Muslim communities, but are asked not to participate in the formal prayer. When the men line up for *janaža* (funeral prayer), the women sit off to the side and often pray silently. Allowing the women to be present at the cemetery is

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36 Interview with a *murīd*, September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
37 Interview with “Rabia,” January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
another way Shaykh Asaf has acculturated the *tariqa* to the American setting. In Bosnia, women in the *tariqa* gather at home and perform *dhikr* for the deceased while the men perform *janāza* and attend to the burial. This is traditionally viewed as better and allows the women to grieve in the privacy of a home with other women for emotional support. It is also considered a way of protecting them from the sometimes traumatic finality of the burial. In contrast, in Waterport following the short funeral service at the *tekiya*, the women go to the cemetery and participate alongside the men in reciting *du‘ā’s* and covering the typically simple, handmade casket with soil. Dramatic displays of emotion are strongly discouraged at the grave site because the soul is believed to be very sensitive to sound while the body is being buried. Both the men and women in attendance are expected to be sombre and respectful.

Leadership Roles

Among Western discourse, there is often great emphasis on whether women are permitted to hold leadership roles in Islamic institutions. In Sufi *tariqas*, the visible leadership is traditionally held by men due to interpretations of the *sunna* and *shari‘a* and cultural norms. Although the West is conditioned to consider this approach as sexist, it does not necessarily lessen the importance of female roles or their participation. More importantly, it does not limit them on their spiritual paths.

Most of the distinguished *tariqa* leadership roles in the Alami Tariqa are filled by men, except for that of keeper of the dreams and keeper of the regalia. According to Shaykh Asaf, he chooses the most qualified available individual for leadership positions, and gender is one aspect of many that is taken into consideration. One woman *murid* recalled being told by Shaykh Asaf that the women usually progress faster on the spiritual path than men and do not need the validation provided by filling leadership roles. In contrast, the men benefit spiritually much more from being in leadership positions. Another woman, though, later disagreed with this view and considered it to be demeaning toward men.

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38 I experienced this in Sarajevo, Bosnia, in January of 2005. However, at a Muslim funeral for a public Bosnian figure in 2007, both men and women were present at the cemetery.

39 Personal communication, March 23, 2010, Waterport, N.Y. In the much smaller Alami Tariqa communities located in England and Sweden, women play more important roles in the *tariqa* leadership.

40 Interview with *murid*, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

41 Personal communication with a *murid*, May 25, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
The Alami community members sometimes are expected to fulfil certain roles in society based on gender. While both men and women are created with the ability to nurture and love, it is understood that women typically embody this attribute more easily than men. Therefore, in a family situation the mother usually cares for the children. Also, Shaykh Asaf strongly encourages the murids to care for their aging parents instead of placing them in nursing homes. Thus far, at least six aging individuals have experienced personal care from the women in Waterport. This every-day, care-giving experience, whether for children or elderly adults, lends itself to spiritual growth. As Fatima said, “you get to deal with yourself everyday ... you see your shortcomings, your temper, and your selfishness. And, as a mother, you just have to give it all up.”

While every caretaker undergoes similar struggles, the murids view these as opportunities to strive to better themselves. This daily effort equates to an irshad (spiritual lesson) of overcoming the nafs, or ego, which the men do not necessarily experience to the same extent.

The men are considered to be the head of the family and, as such, have the major responsibility of leading the family. Likewise, there is a strong emphasis on the men financially supporting the family. These expectations lend themselves to powerful irshads of conquering the nafs and putting aside personal comforts for the benefit of others.

Shaykh Asaf’s flexibility has allowed the murids to adapt to different situations and still receive spiritual benefit. For example, a number of women in the tariqa work outside their homes, which is considered acceptable. It is sometimes encouraged for the purpose of doing something meaningful and contributing to society, or it may be necessary to increase the family income. At times, husbands have been unable to work due to health or educational reasons, and the main financial responsibility has fallen upon their wives. This is not encouraged by Shaykh Asaf because of the concept that Muslim women should not need to work, but it is accepted if the situation requires it.

Regardless of gender differences, the murids are all considered theoretically capable of reaching the level of `arif and `arifa (perfect knowledge) and the spiritual station of shaykh. While female shaykhas are fully able to teach others, they are not expected to take on formal murids, according to Shaykh Asaf. Having formal murids is an immense responsibility expected only of shaykhs. Shaykhas provide spiritual guidance to others, but it is not traditionally done in the same fashion as the male shaykhs.

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42 Interview with “Fatima,” January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
43 In Islam, women are not required to give their income to their husbands, but can spend it as they decide.
44 Personal communication, May 25, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
Historical and contemporary examples of female Muslim spiritual teachers are uncommon, but not unheard of. Among the more famous is Rabi’a al-Adawiyya of Basra, who is known for her pious and ascetic life. Hasan al-Basri, Sofyan-e Thauri, and other ascetics of the time are recorded as seeking her presence and consulting with her (Din Attar 1976, 39-51). Also, ‘Uyaina, the grandmother of the Sufi Abu ‘l-Khair at-Tinani al-Aqta’, reportedly had 500 men and women under her spiritual tutelage (Schimmel 2003, 43). Shaykh Ibn al-Arabi is particularly known for learning from the saintly women he encountered throughout his life. As a young man, he met Fatima bint al-Muthanna, a joyful, ascetic widow in Seville whose life was completely fulfilled by the opening chapter of the Qur’an. She came to be identified as Ibn al-Arabi’s “spiritual mother” (Schimmel 2003, 45). A Persian woman named Nizam, whom Ibn al-Arabi met while walking around the Kaaba in Mecca, was a source of inspiration for his collection of poems Tarjuman al-ashwaq (The Interpreter of Longing) and his life’s work Al-futuhat al makkiyya (The Meccan Revelations) (Schimmel 2003, 46-47, 264).

A small number of Sufi movements in the West have initiated shaykhas in their orders. Rabia Martin was initiated by Inayat Khan in 1912 as the leader of the American branch of his Sufi Order (Westerlund 2004, 24). Her authority, however, was later denied by the European branch (Hermansen 1998, 64). Shaykha Fariha Fatima was reportedly initiated in 1985 by Shaykh Muzaffer Ozak of the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa. Following the death in 1995 of Shaykh Nur (also known as Lex Hixon), founder of the Khalwati-Jerrahi branch the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Sufi Order (NAJSO), based near New York City, the leadership of the NAJSO passed to her (Rausch 2009, 162). Shaykha Amina Teslima is also part of the NAJSO. In addition, Dr. Nahid Angha, whose father is the late Shi’a Sufi Shah Maghsoud, leads the Sufi movement called the International Association of Sufism. Many other American women involved in Sufism are esteemed scholars and translators of Sufi and Islamic writings including Laleh Baktiar, Gray (Aisha) Henry, and Camille Helminski (Hermansen 2006b).

Although not many women in the Alami Tariqa serve in tariqa leadership roles and none have, apparently, reached the state of shaykha, they do fulfil leadership positions in community activities and projects. This includes acting on the board of directors of the World Life Institute Education Centre, directing the Project Life orphan rehabilitation program, and organising Eid celebrations, wedding receptions and dinners.

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Many have travelled internationally for humanitarian programs and on behalf of the ṭariqa community. There are opportunities for women to fill traditional roles as well, for example by serving tea and cooking, but, as Rabia noted, Shaykh Asaf “has definitely tried to liberate us from the kitchen.”

The women in the Alami Tariqa have attempted to start long-term events held solely for females, such as a dhikr circles or poetry readings. As Hermansen (1991, 95) comments, “Women’s meeting provides an important arena for Muslim women of diverse ethnic and class backgrounds to interact and share.” However, these attempts have been unsuccessful in the long term. This is likely due to the diverse interests of the murīds, competing personalities, and lack of an established leader amongst them. As one murīd observed, “It seems like when we get together there are still these ‘catty things’ going on and ego things that interrupt the flow, or [the discussion] goes to issues of shaʿī and nobody is capable to direct the group differently.”

It was generally assumed that this would improve with time as the murīds matured and the community developed. However, at this point, all ṭariqa activities are open to both men and women.

Clothing

Since the Alami members participate in both Western and Muslim public circles, they are adaptable in their dress and approach it contextually. When they enter the tekīya, they are expected to dress modestly by wearing outfits that cover their arms and legs. Also, socks are strongly encouraged. The women wear head scarves and loose trouser or dress outfits that sometimes include an abaʿya, a robe-like cloak. The men wear long-sleeved shirts and trousers. On special occasions, many of the male murīds additionally wear vests, called haidars, decorated with a little green and red ribbon. Some have short beards, but the response was mixed when asked if this was in observance of the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. One murīd said during the interview that he had grown his beard during Ramadan one year and simply had not shaved it off, and he did not consider it to be a statement about his religion. Shaykh Asaf does not have a beard, and this may have impacted others’ perceptions on the issue.

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48 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
49 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
50 Interview with “Muhammad,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
The murīds are requested to wear black, a favoured colour of the Prophet Muhammad and Ahlel Bayt. This practice was encouraged beginning in the mid-1980s. Shaykh Asaf explains the reasons further in *The Sufi Code of Conduct*:

> In general the colours of Sufis are black and white who follow the Ahlel Bayt. [We] are inclined to think of black being the colour of the Prophet, `alayhi salām. And if you take Karbala as your point of reference, and if you see pictures that remained after Karbala, you will see all the women of Karbala dressed in black after the tragedy took place. (Shaykh Asaf 2000, 219)

This unified colour of outfits appears to facilitate an environment of prayer and meditation in the tekiya. It also serves to equalise the murīds regardless of age, prosperity, or ethnicity in a similar fashion as the white ihram outfits worn during the hājj.

There are several examples related to dress which demonstrate the gradual process of Islamisation occurring in the Alami Tariqa. In the years prior to my research, the men rarely wore head coverings (kūfī), but Shaykh Asaf began to place emphasis on it leading up to the remembrance of Ashura in 2010, which increased its practice. By the next year, wearing a kūfī to the tekiya had become a normative practice for the men. Likewise, Shaykh Asaf made it clear in 2010 that the women should draw their scarves around their necks and fully cover their hair for religious activities in emulation of the women of Ahlel Bayt. Previously, it had been acceptable to tie a triangular scarf behind the head, allowing the neck and ears as well as a little hair to show. With these small steps, he has been leading the tariqa community closer to mainstream Islam.

Outside the tekiya, the men and women strive to uphold modesty in a way that blends with modern, American culture. As Shaykh Asaf (2004, 220) teaches, “The code of dress has to be decency, but decency of the code of dress has to be in accordance with the decent local customs.” When not attending religious services, the men typically wear short or long-sleeved shirts with trousers. The women usually wear long sleeved or three-quarter length sleeved shirts and trousers or skirts, or long dresses with a light sweater or blouse to cover their arms. They do not typically cover their hair unless participating in a Muslim activity or visiting other Muslims who are not involved in the tariqa. However, they often wear scarves loosely around their necks or keep them in their purses.

Wearing highly visible Islamic clothing, such as the hijāb, in the non-Muslim, public arena is not advised by Shaykh Asaf. As he explained, “Hijab is not universal Islamic clothing. It is more tribal. Different Islamic countries have different clothing
customs.” There is also recognition that wearing an Islamic symbol does not reflect on the inner dimensions of that person. Similar to Shaykh Muzaffar Ozak of the Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa (Gabbay 1988, 140), Shaykh Asaf suggested that wearing the ḥijāb might attract more attention than would be desirable and defeat the initial purpose of modesty. Additionally, one of the young, married men explained that the ḥijāb would relay information to the non-Muslims that would empower them and allow them to label the ṭariqa community.

Likely, the religious discrimination suffered by Muslims in the Balkans, particularly during Communism and the latest 1990s war, has shaped the approach to wearing religious symbols in Waterport. Since this community is in a sometimes hostile non-Muslim environment, the ḥijāb or other Islamic symbols would draw attention, and the wearer would likely become a target for anti-Islamic behaviour. Jawad (2006, 155-156) comments that “the ḥijāb is no longer seen as an innocent mark of a woman intent on maintaining her cultural or religious identity, but as a threatening symbol of a pathologically anti-Western ideology.” As it is, the community is already the target of harassment and prejudice, and they would rather keep a discreet profile than further encourage negative attention. However, when the Alami murīds visit other Muslims or travel to Muslim countries, they are expected to wear culturally-appropriate clothing, including the ḥijāb.

Individually, the murīds have negotiated this concept of appropriate dress as they matured as Muslims. Hermansen (1991, 101-102) notes that some converts to Islam go through a stage of dramatic change regarding their dress and “then gradually rationalise that it is not required in the American context, on the basis of modernist or personalist/Sufi concepts.” In the 1970s and early 1980s, about half of the female murīds in Waterport regularly wore scarves which tied behind their heads, covering most of their hair. This practice has since diminished, mostly because of the reasons mentioned above.

During the interviews, a murīd shared how she had originally dressed in the purdah (full, head-to-toe covering) after embracing Islam and prior to joining the ṭariqa. The Islamic literature she was reading at the time strongly encouraged this extreme modesty for women, and she knew others who ascribed to it. However, she took it off

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51 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, June 11, 2011, Washington, D.C.
52 Personal communication with a murīd, May 27, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
53 When I did research in Bosnia for seven weeks in 2007, I wore the hijab every day.
54 Personal communication with “Rabia,” May 20, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
55 Interview with a murīd, November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
after having an eye-opening experience that made her aware of the uneasiness it invoked among those who were unfamiliar with the flowing robe. While walking in a city, she had seen a child fall off his bike in the road and rushed to help him. As she approached, he became afraid of her: “When you see somebody hurting, and you’re trying to come to their aid, and they’re scared of you, that’s ... yeah. Now I can go around helping people and they won’t be afraid.” This experience led her to take a more culturally-acceptable approach to modesty.

Ahmed, who was raised in a Muslim environment, also voiced his support in an interview that Muslims in America do not need to wear foreign outfits in order to be good Muslims. As he said:

There’s no such thing as ‘distinctly Muslim [clothing]’ because Islam never really had a set of clothing and said: Hey, this is how you need to dress as a Muslim. We never had it. The Prophet was from the Arab world, so he dressed as an Arab. If you go to Pakistan, they dress as Pakistanis. There’s no such thing as a Muslim right way of dressing except for appropriate dress.  

He conveyed that “appropriate dress” should not stand out “so you don’t tell the other person that you’re different than them,” but it should send the message of kindness and purity. Regarding wearing modest clothing during the summer months, one of the women murīds expressed difficulty finding culturally-appropriate, modest and yet cool clothing in the American stores. She noted how patient Shaykh Asaf has been with the new murīds and their dress, giving them time to adjust and build an appropriate wardrobe. The Alami members are attempting to combine the Islamic concept of modesty with their Western environment in such a way not to provoke unwanted attention from non-Muslims while still dressing appropriately according to Islam.

Relationships

There are very firm guidelines for individuals in the Alami Tariqa who are interested in marriage which dramatically contradict the social and moral norms in America. These “rules and regulations,” as they are fondly referred to by some of the young adults, are declared forthright by Shaykh Asaf or established as the need arises. They are usually aimed at protecting the honour of the women, which is considered very

56 Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
57 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
important by this community, and establishing a strong base on which to build a trusting and secure marital relationship.

Dating, in the modern Western sense, is strictly forbidden. The ease with which a relationship becomes intimate is understood clearly, and this is a preventative measure against sexual relations outside marriage, which is illegal behaviour in Islam. Additionally, it is generally not accepted to be alone with someone of the opposite sex in a closed area or to sleep in the same building with someone unmarried of the opposite sex above the age of 12, even if other individuals are present.\textsuperscript{58} These rules are somewhat flexible, though, and depend on the actual situation. The young adults sometimes struggle with these and other protective parameters because of how they contradict the dominant culture. Although it is allowed to socialise in groups of three or more, preferably including an accompanying relative of the woman, this is sometimes awkward to arrange and has resulted in the practice being sometimes considered “babysitting” by the young adults.\textsuperscript{59} These rules are especially difficult to uphold when a potential spouse is largely unfamiliar with strict gender separation or a non-Muslim. While men are permitted in Islam to marry non-Muslim women, it has not occurred among the jama\textsuperscript{a} members. Also, none of the female murīds have married non-Muslim men, which would be strictly against the teachings of the Qur’an.\textsuperscript{60}

Shaykh Asaf’s direct involvement in his murīds’ plans for marriage fluctuates, likely because his involvement does not guarantee marital compatibility. Often, marriage is an extension of an irshād (spiritual lesson), and the couple must struggle through their nafs to find compatibility. Also, the young adults may wish to act independently and find someone on their own before asking Shaykh Asaf’s opinion. Arranged marriages, in the sense that the candidates do not know each other and meet only briefly prior to their engagement, are not practiced in this community. The individuals are typically acquainted, some more than others, and they either propose marriage themselves or are recommended to marry by Shaykh Asaf, who knows them and their families well. Within the last few years, several murīds requested Shaykh Asaf’s help to find a spouse and involved him throughout the process, while another waited until just prior to meeting his future spouse, who lived overseas, to notify Shaykh Asaf of his marriage plans.

\textsuperscript{58} Of course, this does not prevent from all potential situations of intimate relations outside of marriage.
\textsuperscript{59} Personal communication with young murīd, June 5, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
\textsuperscript{60} However, one young woman living in the jama\textsuperscript{a} married a non-Muslim man several years ago, causing Shaykh Asaf to refer to them as illegally married, a declaration that reiterated the adherence to the sha\textsuperscript{f} ‘a and sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad.
Typically, Shaykh Asaf’s advice is to marry quickly after becoming engaged. He quotes Oscar Wilde’s play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (2007, 94): “I am not in favour of long engagements. They give people the opportunity of finding out each other’s character before marriage.” However, the advice depends on the actual situation, as he once recommended a couple to wait three years prior to getting married. At the time of my research, this couple had finished the suggested waiting period, married, and were expecting their first child. As always, it is up to the individual to choose whether to follow Shaykh Asaf’s recommendations, but if someone asks for advice, he or she is greatly encouraged to follow through with it.

When choosing a marriage partner, whether he or she is a murīd of Shaykh Asaf does not appear to play an important role, but openness to the tariqa is critical. This is likely because the familial bond between those who grew up in the Waterport community naturally discourages intimacy between the second-generation murīds. This was demonstrated by the fact that only one of the seven marriages that occurred over the last five years was between two murīds who were raised in Waterport. The other marriages involved murīds and Muslims from Texas, England, Denmark, Chechnya, Morocco, and Turkey.

Conclusions

In the Alami Tariqa, both men and women are able to fully participate and are encouraged to reach for the highest spiritual states. Since this tariqa is in an environment where men and women are expected to interact naturally and work with each other, Shaykh Asaf approaches gender issues by teaching correct behaviour and not imposing strict separations. Moderate gender separations are upheld during religious activities to reduce distraction and maintain a respectful environment. Women and men are considered equal participants in tariqa activities. Although women do not usually hold titled leadership positions in the tariqa, they are actively involved in the leadership of community activities and projects. Men and women are encouraged to dress modestly, but in a manner that does not draw attention or distinguish them as different from American culture. There are strict rules for individuals wishing to marry and dating is not allowed, which has caused minor difficulties for some of the young murīds because this is contrary to Western norms.
Chapter Summary

As demonstrated in this chapter, the Alami Tariqa has acculturated to the American setting regarding both ethnic and gender issues and is undergoing a process of Islamisation. Shaykh Asaf instigated Sufism in Waterport by introducing time-honoured Balkan ṭarīqa traditions, but allowed it to assume a local identity based on the new culture and participants. As an Islamic scholar and shāfi’ī jurist, Shaykh Asaf has interpreted and applied shāfi’ī to the American setting based on his interpretation of the needs of this culture. This process of Islamisation has been implemented somewhat gradually, allowing the American participants to adjust to Islam and mature as Muslims over time. In his interpretation, Shaykh Asaf has attempted to reduce the influence of foreign and non-Islamic customs and cultivate a Western Islamic ṭarīqa that provides a meaningful spiritual path for both men and women regardless of their ethnic backgrounds.

Over the nearly 40 years that this ṭarīqa has existed in America, the ṭarīqa and its participants have been undergoing cultural processes of adaptation. The ṭarīqa was initially portrayed as a universal movement to make it more acceptable to Western seekers who had been attracted to Shaykh Asaf as a spiritual guide. Within six months of instruction, though, these early murīds took the shahāda and were expected to practice the Islamic requirements, such as the daily prayers. Since then, Islam has played a prominent role in the ṭarīqa’s activities, and the shahāda has been required of the murīds. Shaykh Asaf has gradually implemented changes over time, including stricter dress codes to religious activities and memorisation of Qur’anic verses, to bring the community closer to traditional Islam.

Shaykh Asaf imbued Waterport with an Islamic moral code based on his interpretation of shāfi’ī in the American setting. By teaching and modelling appropriate behaviour, he has established an environment in which men and women are encouraged to have meaningful lives and experience opportunities for spiritual growth. Modesty in behaviour and dress contribute to this moral environment. Instead of imposing a strict gender partition, the men and women uphold moderate separations while participating in religious activities in the same room. Strict rules for those interested in marriage are seen to uphold shāfi’ī and establish a clear moral code for interactions between men and women.

The Alami community in Waterport mimics the ethnic diversity found in America and has developed to be a culturally-rich but unified community. Although Balkan
traditions are present, particularly in the *tariqa* ceremonies, Shaykh Asaf’s approach has released Sufism from being a homogeneous cultural movement and allowed it to develop naturally according to the participants and the local setting. The *tariqa* community upholds the message of equality of humankind which they observe in the Qur’an, and ethnicity does not play a major role in the leadership or interactions between the *tariqa* members. Wearing foreign dress, including the *hijab*, and religious symbols outside of Muslim spaces is discouraged by Shaykh Asaf because he is striving to apply Islamic ideals to the Western society and not to transplant foreign customs.

Since acculturation and Islamisation are ongoing, gradual processes, this chapter presents a glimpse at the Alami Tariqa’s approach to gender and ethnic issues as it was at the time of the research. I project that this *tariqa* will retain its current involvement of women as full participants due to the cultural setting. In the future women will most likely reach the higher spiritual states and serve as role models for the newer female *murids*. Gradual Islamisation is anticipated to continue in that the *murids* will advance in their knowledge and practice of Islam upon the encouragement of Shaykh Asaf and individual dedication. The ethnic composition is also expected to continue to diversify due to marriage and increasing membership of the *tariqa*. The following chapter explores the reasons why individuals decided to join this *tariqa*. 
CHAPTER FOUR

Embracing Islamic Sufism

The joke [in the cartoon shows] two men in a galley boat chained to the oars. You see in the background the guy with the whip. They’re both sitting down and one is turning to the other and saying: “Whatever happened to the welcome aboard cocktail party?”

– Interview with “Nuri,” September 14, 2009

For years the cut-out newspaper cartoon described above was hanging in the library of the tekiya in Waterport. Although the physical work of oarsmen in a galley boat differs from the struggle in Sufism against one’s nafs (lower base self), the murīds sometimes joke about how they did not realise, in the beginning, exactly how much work was necessary to make spiritual progress. “Whatever happened to the welcome aboard cocktail party?” is sometimes said with a wry smile to someone undergoing difficulty overcoming an attachment or struggling with a personal issue. This cartoon, in a light-hearted manner, highlights the fact that joining the Alami Tariqa is a serious, life-changing decision that requires taking a leap of faith, trusting that the struggle of developing as a spiritual person in the midst of the self-oriented, materialistic, and secular world will be rewarded by God in this world and the hereafter.

While the previous chapter provided a foundation for understanding the acculturation of Sufism by the Alami Tariqa in Waterport, this chapter looks at why individuals joined this tariqa, a process which is understood as a religious conversion for this study. According to Rambo and Farhadian (1999, 23), conversion can refer to a number of experiences 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.” The data for this chapter is based on responses from 37 Alami murīds (out of 52) who participated in the surveys and interviews.¹ In contrast to the open-ended interview questions, the survey included fixed categories from which the

¹ Due to information withheld on the surveys, important characteristics of three individuals could not be ascertained, including religious history. Therefore, these participants were excluded from parts of the study.
participants were asked to indicate their reasons for joining the ṭarīqa. The survey responses were then compared and studied for themes and issues which appear to have been influential in their decision to become a murīd. There is a lack of documented studies on the reasons for embracing Islamic Sufism, although there are studies on conversion to Islam. This chapter strives to bring more awareness to this topic. The ethnic, religious, and generational diversity of individuals represented in this ṭarīqa provides an opportunity to look at a variety of experiences.

Religious Conversion

Religious conversion is understood as a complex, on-going process that takes place in the socio-cultural context of the lives of individuals. It may involve a transformational event but is not solely defined by it (Rambo 1993, 5). Religious conversion may have roots in adolescence, when youth begin forming individual identities, but it is not necessarily an adolescent occurrence (Köse 1996, 49, 53). Lewis Rambo (1993) provides a flexible seven-stage model of conversion involving: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. The process leading up to and including the religious commitment are of interest for the present study.

Paul Heelas (2000, 58-70) explores the applicability of “conversion” to those pursuing a spiritual journey and suggests that “a turning within” more accurately applies to the “ever-changing quest.” Particularly in New Age circles, this is often described as a consumer-driven search for personal satisfaction and involves the adoption of individualised, self-identified religions. Likewise, Taylor (1999, 35) discusses this issue in his three categories of conversions called “inward, outward, and awkward.” He situates conversion to Islam through Sufism in the “awkward” category, which encompasses individuals who shy away from partaking in an official conversion to Islam marked by rituals. This suggests that individuals participate in Sufism because of their attraction to the spiritual elements but are not devoted to the outward religion. However, Heelas (2000,

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2 The survey also included space to indicate reasons for joining the ṭarīqa not included in the established categories.
3 Future research could compare the conversion experiences of those in the Alami Tariqa to those in other ṭarīqas.
4 The concept of conversion has changed from dualistic concepts of it as either a sudden turn from the limited, temporal world to eternal and unchanging realities, such as Plato writes in Book VII of *The Republic*, “The Cave,” or a cycle of growth similar to the ordered growth stages of a seed, based on Aristotle and Thomas of Aquinas (Flinn 1999, 54). A fuller understanding of conversion takes into account both experiences.
73) offers that “conversion” may be appropriate for some NRMs (and likewise alternative religions) that have “full-time members, authority structures, specific beliefs and practices,” which applies to the Alami Tariqa.

Since joining the Alami Tariqa involves an official ceremony and the murīds are required to take the shahāda (if not already Muslim), I consider “conversion” to be an appropriate scholarly term and useful for analysing this topic. However, conversion has negative connotations, particularly due to the actions of some Christians throughout history. Also, it is important to note that in Arabic there is no direct translation of conversion (Dutton 1999, 151). Instead, 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.” As stated in the Qur’an (7:172), all souls bowed to God prior to being born, while in Ezekiel. This is sometimes interpreted to mean that all individuals are born Muslim even though this awareness does not remain in the consciousness. As a result, embracing Islam is sometimes known as a “reversion” instead of conversion because the individual is returning to his or her original belief in God (Jawad 2006, 155). Although “reversion” may apply better linguistically according to Muslims, it was not often used by the murīds of the Alami Tariqa. They preferred to be known, most often, as simply Muslim.

Among the murīds involved in this study, there was considerable discomfort with the idea of having converted to Islam because of the concept that everyone is born a believer in God. Also, many do not consider themselves as having rejected their previous religious traditions because Islam does not deny the prophets in Judaism or Christianity. This response differed greatly from Zebiri’s (2008, 15) study of conversion to Islam in which only two of the 30 British interviewees requested not to be called converts. This disparity may be because individuals involved in Sufism tend to uphold universal understandings of religion and a strong belief in being connected in faith to the Christians and Jews (People of the Book - Ahlel Kitab). They are less likely to view their acceptance of Islam as a “conversion.” Also, they did not want to be distinguished as different from other Muslims.

During the research, this issue caused some difficulty since some of the murīds who had embraced Islam later in life chose not to identify themselves as having converted. For example, to the survey question: “Have you been under shahāda your whole life?” a small number answered “yes” but also filled in the year of taking their
shahāda and reasons for this religious change. With ambiguous responses such as these, the answers to the other survey questions were critical for understanding the background of the individuals.5

Exploring this issue further, a question on the survey asking whether it was appropriate to call a “new Muslim” a convert to Islam. The overwhelming response from the murīds was “No,” except for a handful of answers that agreed it was a useful term in some situations, such as for superficial, linguistic purposes to label someone who changed religious affiliations. Some felt very strongly against the use of “convert.” As one wrote, “You do not ‘convert’ to submission, you just submit.” Another commented on the survey, “Personally, I never ascribed to any other belief outside that of one God. So, I don’t consider myself a convert.” The survey respondents suggested several alternative terms such as embraced, ascended, accepted, submitted, took shahāda, and reverted.

A few survey responses highlighted the undertone of domination and inequality implied by “conversion” even when used by Muslims to refer to other Muslims: “I prefer not to label individuals or groups in general. The word ‘convert,’ though, seems to me to have negative connotations attached to it. One should seek to welcome new Muslims openly and praise their courage to commit to the path of Islam, not isolate them with labels that have no relevance or importance.” Another wrote, “Yes, technically, I suppose that’s a correct use of the term, but it seems a little condescending (like calling someone a ‘newbie’ or a ‘greenback’). I probably wouldn’t use the term, just to avoid creating a schism of ‘I’m experienced, you’re a trainee.’” In recognition of these issues, alternative terms are often used in this study including “embraced” and “accepted” Islam.

The process of joining a tariqa is called taking intisāb. It involves reaffirming one’s faith in and commitment to God and taking an oath of allegiance (bay’ah) with a shaykh. The shaykh is considered to be a divinely-inspired guide, not an intercessor, and the murīd is reminded that he or she will be held responsible for his or her own actions on the Day of Judgment. In the Alami Tariqa, intisāb takes place in a private, formal ceremony in which only other murīds are present. Thereafter, the shaykh and the murīd are considered to be spiritually linked, and changing shaykhs is greatly discouraged. Other tariqas in America have less strict approaches to intisāb, as demonstrated in the allowance of non-murīds to observe the intisāb ceremony or have it recorded, as has been

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5 If they reported a previous religious affiliation, then it was clear that they had embraced Islam even if they did not indicate having converted on the survey.
done in the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa. Also, at times the bay’ah is not as strictly honoured, and individuals have been known to switch from one shaykh to another, or “baraka [spiritual blessing] surf” as Hermansen (1998, 158) identifies it. Although belonging to more than one tariqa may be acceptable in Muslim settings, such as South Asia, in the American context it often implies indecision and a lack of loyalty.

As noted previously, the role of Sufism in attracting individuals to Islam in the U.S. is not easily discernible. Although it has been influential in introducing some Americans to Islam, Hermansen (2000) and Smith (1999, 169) agree that many Americans involved in Sufi movements do not embrace Islam. Hermansen (2000) attributes this to “an attraction to certain cultural elements influenced by Sufism, such as poetry or music, or through the writings of Western-based Sufis such as Idries Shah.” This is supported by the findings of Poston’s (1992, 63) study of Islamic missionary activity (da’wah) in the West. He states that Sufism had not played a significant role in spreading Islam and reports not finding any Sufi tariqas in America actively involved in da’wah. Zarcone (1999, 117) suggests that Europeans who have joined Sufism, particularly those who have been influenced by French writer René Guénon, often idealise Sufism, which then becomes separated from its history and distinct from its counterpart in Islamic societies. A similar transformation of Sufism has occurred in America, largely due to the influence of Inayat Khan, who promoted it as a spiritual movement separate from Islam, and the short Sufi stories of Idries Shah. Those who are attracted to Sufism, but not Islam, find community among the movements which espouse universal, perennialist beliefs. It was not until the mid-1990s that Islamic Sufism began developing a wider public image and da’wah outreach. This was mostly due to the efforts of Shaykh Hisham of Lebanon, the successor of Shaykh Nazim of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa, who moved with his family to America in 1990 and is said to have brought tens of thousands of Americans to Islam over the last two decades (Damrel 2006, 117-118).

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7 Poston (1992, 63) relays that Sufism likely plays an indirect role in influencing approaches to da’wah in America. This is demonstrated by the belief of Isma’il al-Faruqi, a professor at Temple University who was active in creating the Da’wah Movement of North America, that “Americans suffered from spiritual bankruptcy…” (Haddad 2006, 24).
8 There is disagreement as to whether or not Guénon converted to Islam or, if he did, how this should be interpreted.
9 The actual number is vague. Literature published by the Islamic Supreme Council of America (ISCA), which was established by Shaykh Hisham, states that this tariqa has converted 60,000 Americans to Islam (Damrel 2006, 118). However, Damrel suggests that this number is likely overstated since Shaykh Hisham indicated only having 30,000 murids.
There are very few academic studies which directly look into the reasons why Westerners join Islamic Sufism. Instead, there is a tendency to mention the general role of Sufism in bringing individuals to Islam. From the historical perspective, Arnold (1935) and Levtzion (1979) discuss the important role of Sufis in spreading Islam, often assisted by trade routes, beyond the lands conquered by Muslim military advancement and also in turning the hearts and minds of those within the conquered lands toward Islam. In contrast, Jawad (2006) takes a theological approach to Islamic Sufism, showing how it may appeal to contemporary Western women.

Literature on conversion to Islam provides insight into this topic, not only because embracing Islam is an important aspect of involvement in Islamic Sufism, but also because this research often includes the participation of Sufi adherents, and sometimes the scholars draw attention to them. For example, in the study conducted by Ali Köse (1996) on the reasons for becoming Muslim among 70 British converts, 33 percent are involved in Sufi tariqas. He highlights Sufism as an NRM which offers a way to fill a growing sense of spiritual emptiness in the West (Köse 1996, 156). The backgrounds of the Sufis are compared to the Muslims who do not belong to a tariqa. Also, Anna M. McGinty (2006) anthropologically studied identity formation and meaning-making among female Muslim converts by conducting interviews with nine American and Swedish women. Two of the American research participants are involved in Sufi tariqas, and McGinty presents their conversion narratives from Christianity to Islamic Sufism.

Two examples of conversion studies which include Sufi-oriented Westerners without drawing attention to them, as is apparent from their data, are Carol Anway’s (2002) Daughters of Another Path and Kate Zebiri’s (2008) British Muslim Converts. These studies do not specifically explore conversion to Sufism for very different reasons. While Anway (2002) organises the material without direct mention of Sufism, Zebiri (2008) is unable to pursue the topic due to requests from the interviewees not to be distinguished from other Muslims. Kate Zebiri indicates that, out of 30 individuals who were interviewed, “seven interviewees clearly had Sufi tendencies ... However, only one of these accepted the appellation ‘Sufi’” (2008, 48). This highlights one of the difficulties in studying this topic: the obscurity preferred by some involved in Sufism.

Studies focusing on Sufi movements in the West usually dedicate at least a few sentences to the background of the participants, hinting at their reasons for joining Sufism but not exploring them. These brief profiles often mention their ethnic backgrounds, social class, and levels of education. For example, Weismann (2007b, 167) comments that
the worldwide Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa tends to draw members from three categories: 1) South Asians who are attracted by Shaykh Nazim’s charisma, 2) ethnic Turks who turn to him as a scholar with the ability to correctly interpret Islam in the contemporary world, and 3) Westerners who are in search of “spiritual enlightenment.” Celia A. Genn (2007, 259) states that the clientele of Sufi movements in the West often come from the well-educated middle and upper-middle class, implying that the desire for intellectual pursuits is often influential and that involvement in Sufism may denote a special social status. Many of Hermansen’s writings broadly mention what may attract Westerners to Sufism while focusing on other aspects of Sufism, such as the literary components of contemporary Western writings (2006) or distinctive American qualities of Sufism in the U.S. (2004).

Conversion narratives in the form of first-person autobiographies often provide invaluable insight into the experience of Americans joining Islamic Sufism. The memoir by Muhammad Ali (2004), co-authored by his daughter Hana Yasmeen Ali, tells the life story of the African American world heavyweight boxing champion. It includes his initial conversion to the Nation of Islam, followed by Sunni Islam, and his more recent studies within Sufism. American-born Shaykh Noorudeen Durkee (1992) of the Shadhili-Badawi Tariqa wrote a lengthy memoir called Embracing Islam in which he details his decision to join Sufism and emphasises the importance of adhering to shari‘ah law. Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, an American-born Catholic who embraced Islam and also became a shaykh of the Shadhili Tariqa, shares his intellectual and philosophical conversion narrative online through his website.

Two additional conversion narratives of American Sufi adherents include Muhyiddin Shakoor’s (1988) The Writing on the Water: Chronicles of a Seeker on the Islamic Sufi Path and Maryam Kabeer Faye’s (2009) Journey through Ten Thousand Veils: The Alchemy of Transformation on the Sufi Path. Faye describes her spiritual journey starting from being born into a liberal Jewish family in Hollywood, California, through a number of international travels, including to Hebron near Jerusalem, where she embraced Islam, and experiences meeting shaykhs around the world. In contrast, Shakoor (1988) briefly mentions, in the prologue of his book, how he was introduced to Islam and

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11 This autobiography is currently being reformatted and will be published again, anticipated in 2012. The publishing company is also working to make it available for download online.
his several-year-long search for his *shaykh*, while the actual chapters are organised around spiritual lessons and tasks after having committed to his *shaykh*.

Although personal narratives, such as the examples above, allow for rare, in-depth glimpses of religious conversion, they do not easily allow for detailed comparisons of the reasons for joining Sufism. This is because some are more generous with details about the conversion process than others, and the intended purposes of the narratives vary. It should be noted that the ability of conversion accounts to provide accurate information on the process of conversion has been questioned. This is mostly because the pertinent events happened in the past and, thus, are subject to intentional and unintentional modifications, such as censorship and memory loss. Additionally, the narratives are often influenced by the circumstances of their retellings: whether the purpose is to inspire, inform, confess, or defend the decision, and the nature of the audience: amiable, antagonistic, knowledgeable about Islam, or ignorant. Hermansen (1999), for example, looks at how external factors shape conversion narratives, such as gender, cultural biases, and common literary works of the era.

These concerns are also present in the current study. It is hoped that the variations caused by different external circumstances of the retellings have been limited since each participant had the same audience (the researcher and the imagined future readers) and basic purpose (to inform how he or she came to be in the *ṭarīqa*). However, there is no way of assuring that the narratives capture the facts of what happened. The possibility remains that they could have been influenced by numerous factors. Although, if this study had included a detailed comparison of these conversion narratives to those found on the Internet or in other publications, there would be more likelihood of major differences in the underlying motivations of the retellings, which would have complicated the study.

Since human experiences have commonalities and shared elements, Loftland and Skonovd (1981) have identified six common “motif experiences” within conversion narratives. They include: 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 personal feelings or attachments, 5) revivalism – those caught up by emotional arousal and group conformity, and 6) coercive – those who converted because of social pressure. The study by Köse and Loewenthal (2000, 101) found the intellectual, experimental, and affectional motifs to be the most common in narratives describing conversion to Islam, having each been reported by about 67 percent of their British
research participants. These were followed by the mystical motif, which was significantly less common, occurring 14 percent of the time.

Hermansen (1999, 76-77) explores “Sufi-oriented narratives” as a genre within Westerners’ conversion narratives. Her research indicates four common themes including: 1) those that stressed the importance of adhering to shari‘ah law, 2) the search for a spiritual teacher, 3) the inner transformation into a Muslim, and 4) critiques of Western culture. An additional theme which is represented in many Sufi narratives that may be added to those of Hermansen is: 5) the journey, both physical and spiritual.

Findings

Reasons for Joining the Tariqa

The murīds were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for joining the Alami Tariqa. They were provided with nine pre-determined options, which were based on the literature and my personal experience. The survey question was as follows:

Please rank (from 1 to 5) your top reasons for deciding to become a murīd:

___ Fulfilling an expectation of family or community
___ Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God
___ Personal transformational experience
___ Charisma/ leadership style of the shaykh
___ Intellectual spiritual development
___ Supportive community of faith
___ Spiritual healing
___ Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path
___ Dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms
   Please specify: ________________________________________________
___ Other: ____________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

Since there was confusion among the research participants concerning whether number one or five indicated the most influential reason for becoming a murīd, while coding the results, each numbered reason was counted equally. Table 4.1 lists the results.
Table 4.1

TOP FIVE REASONS FOR BECOMING A MURID IN THE ALAMI TARIQA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total Votes out of 35</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personal, transformational experience</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Intellectual spiritual development</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Desire for spiritual healing</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The murīds were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for joining the Alami Tariqa. These are the results from 35 responses.

The most common reason was because of a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God, agreeing generally with Weismann (2007b), Jawad (2006), and Köse (1996) that Westerners crave spiritual awareness. This finding also suggests that they aspire to deeper faith and experiential-based awareness of God. Interestingly, the second highest-ranking reason was because of a personal, transformational experience. While unexplainable spiritual experiences are frequently in the conversion narratives of Sufi adherents, they are not commonly discussed within the literature as motivational factors for joining Sufism. This study confirms that these experiences played an important role for 83 percent of the murīds in their decision to join the ṭariqa. The high ranking of intellectual spiritual development, tied for third place with the charisma and leadership style of the shaykh, shows this to be a ṭariqa that respects and encourages the pursuit of knowledge. Feeling a connection to the shaykh is important, particularly when deciding to adhere to a specific Sufi path, which will be discussed more below. The results confirm that desire for spiritual healing, ranked fifth, is also an important factor, as Köse (1996, 153) found in his study.

Taking a closer look at the murīds’ experiences allows for an exploration of conversion themes and trends. For clarity, the murīds were divided into three groups based on how they became involved in Sufism. These include: 1) non-Muslims who joined the ṭariqa and became Muslim in a combined process, 2) non-Muslims who embraced Islam separately from joining the ṭariqa, and 3) Muslims who joined the ṭariqa.

13 Two examples from the literature of individuals being inspired to join a ṭariqa by transformational experiences in their lives are found in Webb (1994, 81) and McGinty (2006, 60).
14 Future study could inquire further into the decision making process and analyse the advantages and disadvantages that were considered before joining the ṭariqa.
When it was difficult to decipher from the survey responses whether an individual had become Muslim because of interest in Sufism or not, the number of years between taking *shahāda* and *intisāb* was taken into account. There was a tendency among respondents who embraced Islam as a result of interest in Sufism to become a *murīd* within one year of taking the *shahāda*. Likewise, among those who accepted Islam without the influence of Sufism, all but one became a *murīd* five or more years after taking the *shahāda*. Therefore, if there were no other indications and there were five or more years between the *shahāda* and *intisāb*, it was assumed to have been a separate process.

Below, Part One focuses on the experiences of those who were born and raised non-Muslim and changed their religious affiliation to Islam when joining the *tariqa*, an inter-religious conversion experience. There are 12 individuals in this category based on information gathered in the surveys and interviews. Five of them were interviewed.¹⁵

Part Two explores the experiences of *murīds* who were born and raised non-Muslim and embraced Islam separate from joining the *tariqa*. They had both inter-religious and intra-religious conversions. In total, there are 11 individuals in this category. All respondents in this category embraced Islam between five and 20 years before becoming a *murīd* except one individual. Five of these *murīds* were interviewed.

Part Three examines the experiences of those who were raised as Muslims and became *murīds*, which includes mostly those raised in the Sufi community as children of *murīds* plus a small number of Muslim immigrants.¹⁶ These individuals experienced a combination of conversion experiences involving increased devotion within the same religious tradition and changing membership within the same religious tradition. There are 12 *murīds* in this category, including 10 individuals who were born to *murīds* of Shaykh Asaf in Waterport, representing the second generation of *murīds*. The additional two respondents include an emigrant from South Asia and an individual who did not provide generation or immigration information. Four interviews were conducted, including three with second-generation *murīds* and one with a first-generation immigrant.

¹⁵ Additionally, two were involved in practice interviews, whose information will be used for statistical purposes only, such as gender, ethnicity, and age.

¹⁶ There were a total of 15 *murīds* who were born to *murīds* in Waterport and three first-generation immigrant *murīds* living in/near Waterport at the time of my research.
The 12 individuals in this category who embraced Islam due to their interaction with the *tariqa* were searching for spiritual guidance. Many of them were experimenting with various alternative religions, some of which they had encountered through their readings. A few were specifically looking for a Sufi *shaykh*. Conversion to Islam for these individuals did not usually happen as a result of Islamic *da'wah* or through reading books on Islam. Often, they were drawn to Islamic Sufism by the *shaykh*’s teachings and example, but knew little about formal Islam.17 This is similar to the German individuals who joined the transplanted Sudanese Burhaniya Tariqa, as described by Lassen (2009, 153). Typically, these *murids* had unexplainable transformational experiences that solidified their commitment to the *tariqa*, which is explored later in the chapter. These conversions correspond with Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) intellectual, experimental, and mystical conversion motifs. The main Sufi motifs are that of searching for a guide (Hermansen 1999, 76) and the physical and spiritual journey.

Those in this category all indicated having European ancestry, including one with combined European and Native American. There were almost equal numbers of men (7) and women (5) who came to the *tariqa* in this manner and participated in the research. The respondents in this category became *murids* between 1972 and 1993, when they were between 27 and 37 years old. Six of the participants were born in the U.S., four in Canada, two in Europe, and one did not disclose this information. Among the immigrants, one arrived in America several years before meeting Shaykh Asaf, and the other moved directly to America as a *murid* of Shaykh Asaf.

The Spiritual Search

The majority of individuals in this category initially set out on a spiritual search to fill an emptiness that they perceived in their lives. All of the *murids* indicated that they were raised with some sort of a religious background, either Christianity (8) or Judaism (4), although the role of it in their lives varied greatly. Reasons for leaving their former religious traditions included that the tradition was never an important aspect of their lives, experiencing it as dull and uninteresting, and not liking its exclusive approach regarding

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17 This was also found in McGinty’s (2006, 59) research. She notes that one of her interviewees even had difficulty reading the Qur’an after converting to Islam because she had learned about Islam from observing and mimicking the African village lifestyle.
entrance into heaven. Another indicated on the survey that he had turned away completely from religion because of the hypocrisy in the churches and because those who were involved in Christianity were “not always so interested in Truth.”

Prior to being introduced to Shaykh Asaf, these individuals experimented with a variety of lifestyles and spiritual paths. During their journeys, they tried various Christian denominations, Hasidic Judaism, Zen, Yoga, New Age, Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Pipe Carrier in the Lakota Way (a Native American religion), the teachings of Gurdjieff, and recreational drugs. Some could be identified as “serial converts” because of the number of alternative religions with which they experimented (Haddad 2006, 37). As was common with their conversion narratives, their experiences often involve “coincidences” that led them to the conclusion that God was directing them toward the Sufi path.

A number of murîds in this category discovered Sufism in very unique ways during their spiritual quests. For instance, Fatima recalled acknowledging that she needed a spiritual guide to help her make progress in her search for awareness and closeness to God. She went looking for a teacher and met many whom she recognised as “real,” but who were not right for her, such as a North American Indian shaman and an Indian guru. What facilitated Fatima’s introduction to Shaykh Asaf, surprisingly, was her desire for a deep muscle massage. It just so happened that the masseur she visited had recently met Shaykh Asaf and eventually introduced them. Coinciding with this, while she slept, she had been dreaming about meeting a spiritual teacher who always had the same, recognisable eyes although he took different physical appearances. After some time, in her dreams she was invited to join “the circle” (halqa). It was at this point that the masseur, who had become a friend, took her to meet Shaykh Asaf in Rochester, and she recognised the shaykh as her guide: “We went in there, and there was not a stick of furniture, the whole place was empty. And, I remember ... I just saw his eyes. And, that was it. That was it.” Fatima recognised Shaykh Asaf as her teacher because his eyes were the same as she had seen in her dreams.

Another example is Muhammad, who was introduced to the Sufi community through his involvement in Yoga. Muhammad was raised as a Protestant, but thought it was “dry” and initially turned away from religion all together. When he reached his 30s, Muhammad started looking for something more in his life because he sensed that

18 Georgii Ivanovich Gurdjieff was Greek-Armenian, born in Russia (Westerlund 2004, 20). He was greatly inspired by Sufism, particularly the Mevlevi Tariqa, and travelled around Europe and America spreading his perennialist teachings.
19 Interview with a murîd, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
20 Interview with a murîd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
something was missing. He attended a variety of Christian churches, including the Quakers’ gatherings, and experimented with Yoga, Zen, Buddhism, and Vegetarianism, but found it difficult to commit to any for very long. He also tried to find fulfillment through dedication to his profession, an obsession which ended.

While living at a Yoga centre, Muhammad interacted with a woman who had just met Shaykh Asaf and was very excited. Muhammad had been at the Yoga centre for over a year and knew that he was due for a change. He wondered if the Sufis might have something to offer and looked into it. Twenty-three years later, Muhammad said he cannot imagine doing anything else with his life. Recalling his decision to be involved in the tariqa, Muhammad said, “There was some sense that if I wasn’t doing this, if I wasn’t here, there’s nothing for me.” He knew that Shaykh Asaf was the right guide for him based on his intuition and “a gut feeling.” He learned from Shaykh Asaf that spiritual searching had to be the focus of his life instead of a side hobby, and Muhammad considers this one of the major reasons he was struggling, going from one path to another. He noted that none of the New Age paths that he tried were invested in developing a personal relationship with God or, as he said, “submitting yourself to a supreme being,” but focused more on personal satisfaction. He believed this was one reason they had been unfulfilling for him.

For Amir, a dramatic awakening influenced his decision to join this tariqa.21 He described himself as having been practically a “kafir [unbeliever] hippie” because, although he had a family ancestry in Judaism, it had little impact on his life other than a slight influence on how he prayed. He was seeking “some kind of guidance” and came in contact with Shaykh Asaf through mutual acquaintances. When he met Shaykh Asaf, he had a very powerful experience: “I left shaking because just being in his presence showed me that I was a complete fool up until that moment.” Amir knew that Shaykh Asaf was his guide because “it was his teachings, his wisdom, his Sufi stories, his example. His presence was teaching us if he has something to offer in terms of being a teacher.”

While the murids discussed above were previously unaware of Sufism, others had been introduced to Sufism during their spiritual searches and were specifically looking for a Sufi guide. For Rahman, it was after he had attended university, married, became a father, and went through a divorce that he began seriously searching for Sufis.22 He had heard about them during his earlier travels to Pakistan and Afghanistan and read about

21 Interview with a murid, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
22 Interview with a murid, November 12, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
them in books by Idries Shah, Ibn al-Arabi, and others. He first travelled to Tunisia, where he had read there were Sufi communities, but disappointingly he did not directly encounter any. Later, while travelling in England, he interacted with the Sufi Beshara Movement, which has a school curriculum and a programme for spiritual progress. Considering this too rigid and not what he was looking for, Rahman returned to his home in Europe. Later, he attempted to visit Kurdistan, but illness and the ongoing Gulf War prevented him. Following this, Rahman learned about Shaykh Jemali Shehu in Prizren, Kosovo, and went there on a dual mission to find Sufis and to check the safety for returning refugees. He managed to find the Rifa’i tekiya in Prizren despite the tense political situation and met with Shaykh Jemali’s son and some of the other murids.

Not long after returning home in the early 1990s, Rahman saw an advertisement in the small, local newspaper for a Sufi conference being held in a nearby city. Astounded by this turn of events, he attended the event and met Shaykh Asaf and Shaykh Fadhalla. This demonstrates the physical journey that some undergo in search of spiritual guides. The search is part of the learning process and personal development, which is considered to be an important part of seeking God.

Like Rahman, Nuri was also attracted to Sufism and went in search of a Sufi shaykh. She was dissatisfied by the Protestant perspectives on God and tried a number of alternatives including Roman Catholicism, Buddhism, and Zen. While Zen appealed to her tremendously, she became discouraged with the end goal of emptiness. She wanted a path that had a similar way of training the self as Zen but with a stronger concept of God and a focus on love. Nuri was exposed to Sufism in her 20s by Idries Shah’s books and was drawn to it because of the importance placed on love. Nuri was at a point in her life where Islamic tawhîd (unity of God) made sense to her. She recalls repeating the dhikr “La ilaha illallah” and praying “Allah, please direct me to a true teacher and the path of Tasawwuf [Sufism] because this is what I feel is where I’m going.” Nuri came in contact with Shaykh Asaf through a body movement and dance centre in Toronto in the early 1980s. Feeling deeply that what she was seeking was somehow connected to this centre, she approached the director and asked for assistance in her search for God. The director

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23 Köse (1996, 192) notes that trauma, including divorce, may initiate a spiritual quest.
25 Just over a decade later, Rahman moved to Waterport. See the memoir by Faye (2009), Through Ten Thousand Veils, for another example of the physical journey as part of seeking for guidance.
26 Interview with “Nuri,” September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
27 Hermansen (2000) notes that these books play a large role in introducing Westerners to Sufism, but not necessarily to Islam.
introduced her to Shaykh Asaf and the Waterport community. After spending time in Waterport, Nuri knew “in her heart” that this path would facilitate her spiritual development and that Shaykh Asaf was her teacher because of his guidance.

Although not explicitly asked about in the research, it became apparent that drugs were not an uncommon tool used in spiritual exploration prior to joining Islamic Sufism. Among the literature, this is a common finding regarding those who were involved in NRMs. Köse (1996, 150) reports that 65 percent of the Sufis in his study reported having used drugs, including marijuana and hallucinogens, prior to embracing Islam. One interviewee in the present study discussed that, during her spiritual search, she found smoking pot and dropping acid brought her to a comfortable and magnificent awareness of the unity of God. She said, “It was beautiful. Just, snap, into unity. At that level ... It was like, everything’s the same, and everything’s in glorious submission and just praise ... I never wanted anything to be different than that.” However, she explained that she reached a point where “Allah showed” her very clearly that she could not go any farther in her search by herself, and this is when she went in search of a teacher.

Accepting Islam and Joining the Tariqa

When these individuals took the shahāda, many of them knew very little about formal Islam, but had decided on Shaykh Asaf as a guide. There was a process of learning about the religion and accepting that taking the shahāda was required for joining this tariqa. The murīds in this category took intisāb and shahāda within one year, with most of them taking the shahāda first. Two individuals, however, reported taking the shahāda in the year after becoming a murīd, which occurred with a few of Shaykh Asaf’s early murīds in Canada.

The most common reason stated for accepting Islam was because of a personal transformational experience, which was indicated by all but one survey respondent (see Table 4.2). This makes sense because in order to captivate the seekers and stop their searching, they needed to be convinced that this path had something profound and substantial to offer them. The second most common reason was the strong moral values found in Islam. In third place was the similarity of the message to previous religious

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28 Interview with a murīd, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
29 According to casual conversations with murīds, there have been some individuals over the years who were attracted to Shaykh Asaf’s teachings, but decided not to take intisāb because either they did not want to formally embrace Islam or take on the responsibilities of being a murīd. A few of them maintain contact with Shaykh Asaf.
beliefs. Tied for the fourth and fifth most common reasons were three answers: dissatisfaction with previous religious or spiritual paths, the simplicity of faith, and respect given to other religions. Three respondents explicitly indicated that they were drawn to Islam because they were looking for a spiritual guide and the one they found practised this religion. Only one individual stated that marriage was a reason for becoming Muslim.\textsuperscript{30}

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total Votes out of 9</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Personal transformational experience</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Strong moral values found in Islam</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Similarity of message to previous religious beliefs</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Simplicity of faith</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/5</td>
<td>Respect given to other religions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The \textit{murīds} were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for deciding to become Muslim. These are the results from nine responses.

Interacting closely with the reasons for embracing Islam for the \textit{murīds} in this category were the reasons for joining the \textit{ṭarīqa} (see Table 4.3). The two most common reasons included having a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God, indicated by every survey respondent, and having a personal, transformational experience, indicated by all but one. They were searching for spiritual fulfilment and had life-changing experiences that led them in this direction. Ranked third was intellectual spiritual development. Following this was charisma/leadership style of the \textit{shaykh}, which was ranked fourth. The desire for spiritual healing was ranked fifth.\textsuperscript{31} Notably, only one respondent indicated dissatisfaction with his or her previous religious/spiritual path in the top five reasons for becoming a \textit{murīd}. This is likely due to an eclectic, spiritual approach to religion. Also, none cited dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms.

\textsuperscript{30} Jawad (2006, 156) states that while marriage used to be a very common motivation behind converting to Islam, more women are presently embracing Islam based on personal convictions, not marriage.

\textsuperscript{31} These responses reflected those of all the \textit{murīds}. Please refer to Table 3.1 for a visual of these responses.
Amir provides an example of how closely the processes of taking *shahāda* and *intisāb* were for some of the murīds.\(^32\) When Amir began interacting with Shaykh Asaf in the 1970s, he was one of the *shaykh*’s first murīds in Canada. Convinced that Shaykh Asaf was his spiritual teacher, he took *intisāb* although he did not know much about the spiritual path he was joining. According to his interview, Amir did not know that Shaykh Asaf was associated with Sufism or Islam for about six months of their time together. This was because Shaykh Asaf focused on the inner dimensions of the faith and did not articulate its connection to Islam. Thinking back, Amir was firm that he would have rejected this path if he had been told forthright that it was Islam, likely because of his preconceived notions about this religion. While instructing Amir on the esoteric aspects of Islam, Shaykh Asaf slowly introduced Islamic teachings and encouraged Amir to go on the *hajj* pilgrimage, where he could fully experience the Islamic faith. A few weeks before leaving for Saudi Arabia, Amir took the *shahāda* and was taught the outer form of Islam. Attending *hajj* was an eye-opening experience which touched him deeply and encouraged him to personally dedicate himself to Islam. About a year after taking *shahāda*, he adopted a serious, conscious intention to live as a Muslim, and more than 35 years later, he remains thankful to “Allah” for leading him to this path.

Like Amir, Rahman had no initial intention to become Muslim.\(^33\) However, when he met Shaykh Asaf and Shaykh Fadhllalla at a Sufi conference in Europe, he recognised that taking the *shahāda* was an opportunity to solidify a connection with them, for whom he had spent decades searching. Rahman did not want to lose this chance, although he did not feel prepared to commit himself to Islam and the lifestyle changes this would entail.

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\(^32\) Interview with a *murīd*, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\(^33\) Interview with a *murīd*, November 12, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
His hesitation stemmed mostly from seeing the hypocrisy in organised religion. Also, Rahman struggled with the idea of taking the *shahāda* while understanding and acknowledging that he was not at a stage where he could live as an actual Muslim due to impurities in himself. However, he recognised that there was a “self-cleaning” method in Islam that differed from that which he had found in other religions. Also, aspects of Islam had entered into his consciousness during his travels in Pakistan and Afghanistan, specifically the local usage of “Inshallah” (if God wills it). The same year that he took the *shahāda*, Rahman also became a *murīd* because he was convinced by the way he was led to Shaykh Asaf and Shaykh Fadhlalla that God was showing him this path. His spiritual seeking was a quest for “Truth,” and Islam came to mean Truth at this point for him, although he was still wary of organised religion.

Nuri had a very different beginning in Islam than Rahman and Amir. She had learned about Islam through her readings prior to meeting Shaykh Asaf, and she felt that the *shahāda* was right for her. However, she was advised by Shaykh Asaf to learn more about Islam and pray the formal Muslim prayers for some time prior to taking the *shahāda*. After nine months, she had a spiritual cleansing experience and was invited to take the formal declaration. She relayed, “I can only give you a taste of the experience with words. It was as if a breeze went through my heart. And, that day I got a phone call: Would you like to take *shahāda*?” It was in April of 1983 that Nuri took the *shahāda*, and she took *intisāb* three months later, while Shaykh Jemali from Kosovo was visiting Waterport. When she became Muslim, she changed her lifestyle and her friends: “For me it wasn’t puttering around. It was a very dramatic decision to make a commitment to seeking God in a particular way and leaving my life behind ... I burnt the bridges.” She felt that she was ready for this new way of life and did not express any large difficulties making the change.

Similarly to Nuri’s experience, Fatima was encouraged to learn the prayers and interact with Muslims before officially taking the *shahāda*. She was introduced to Shaykh Asaf just before Ramadan in the 1970s. During this month of fasting and extra observances, the *shaykh* sent her to participate in the evening prayers (*tarāwīḥ*) at the Interfaith Chapel in Rochester with the mostly-Turkish community. Since she had not

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34 This refers to *jihād al-nafs*, the struggle against the inner lower-base self.
35 Interview with a *murīd*, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
36 Although this study does not adequately explore these lifestyle changes, they often involve taking a secondary Muslim name, dressing more modestly, not frequenting nightclubs or bars, and not participating in romantic relationships with the opposite sex outside of marriage.
37 Interview with a *murīd*, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
learned the formal prayers yet, she was instructed to meditate while following the movements of the others. She was the only woman present at *tarāwīh*, and the men attempted to separate her with screens and blankets, none of which stayed in place.

Knowing from her travels in the Middle East when she was younger that they were acting in accordance to their culture, Fatima found their actions amusing, and they did not inhibit her pursuance of Islam. She felt that she had been primed by her travels to accept Islam and that her time with Shaykh Asaf has helped to embrace this faith:

> I used to think that I came to Islam through Shaykh Asaf, and I accepted Islam as my practice of faith because of him. And if he would’ve followed some other path, then I would’ve followed that too. But as the years are going by, I’m feeling more and more as this is my personal faith. Not just that I’m doing it because of him, but there is ... the Truth is the Truth. And he’s been kind enough to lead us to the Truth in this form.  

Initially, Fatima accepted Islam because she felt that the *tariqa* with Shaykh Asaf was the right path for her. However, decades after making this decision to become Muslim, Fatima felt that she had personally embraced Islam and was grateful to Shaykh Asaf for guiding her to Islam. While some *murīds* similarly expressed that over the years they had also personally embraced Islam as their faith, others preferred to relate to Islam in a more universal, spiritual fashion, although they usually perform the required Islamic practices, as indicated in the survey results.

**Part Two: Non-Muslims Who Embraced Islam Separately from Joining the Tariqa**

The second category involves 11 individuals who were born and raised non-Muslim and accepted Islam prior to joining the *tariqa*. Their profiles are notably different from those who were inspired to embrace Islam by Sufism. All of the *murīds* in this category indicated being born in the U.S., and they were more likely to be female (8) than male (3). Their ancestral backgrounds were overwhelmingly African with a bit of Native American and European ancestry mixed in. Only one individual indicated having solely Western European ancestry. Regardless of her light skin colour and European heritage, this individual explained that she felt “born into the wrong culture” and that she relates better to individuals of non-European ancestry.  

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38 Interview with a *murīd*, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
39 Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Hermansen’s (1998, 166) finding that “African Americans who participate in hybrid Sufi movements tend to be drawn to Sufism through their regular Islamic practice, rather than coming into Islam through initially participating in Sufi movements.” This is likely because embracing Islam is considered a way of returning to the religion of their ancestors, and they are not as likely as Caucasians to join Sufi movements which resemble the New Age phenomenon.

These murīds experienced Rambo and Farhadian’s (1999, 23) first type of conversion: from one religious tradition to another (inter-religious conversion) and second, from one group to another within Islam (intra-religious conversion). These individuals accepted Islam mainly because of the simplicity of faith and moral values found in Islam. The time period between taking the shahāda and becoming a murīd varied dramatically between one year and 20 years, with all but one occurring five or more years after taking the shahāda. They joined the tariqa between 1977 and 2005. Their ages at that time ranged between 27 and 53, with the average being 36 years of age. Several indicated having initial scepticism toward Sufism. This intra-religious conversion often involved mystical, transformational experiences. Similar to the previous category of murīds, the conversion themes include intellectual, experimental, and mystical in addition to affectional, inspired by the warmth they felt toward the shaykh and Sufi community (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). Their conversion narratives were mostly focused on the Sufi motif of experiencing an inner, transformational change toward being a true Muslim (Hermansen 1999, 76).

Embracing Islam

Eight of the 11 research participants specified Christianity as their former religions including Catholicism and the Protestant denominations of Baptist, Pentecostal, and Episcopalian. Some had been actively searching for an alternative religion among the Christian and Islamic-based movements, while others expressed having been content with their previous religions. The individuals in this category who were searching usually left their former religious traditions because of disagreement with the religious doctrines, which is a common theme in conversion narratives (Köse 1996, 38). For example, American-born Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller (n.d.) wrote, “As I grew older, and especially after I entered a Catholic university and read more, my relation to the religion became

40 The other three respondents did not specify their former religious traditions.
increasingly called into question, in belief and practice.”41 In addition, mystical experiences played an important role in the inter-religious conversions of many of the *murīds*.

The survey results showed that the most common reason for becoming Muslim was the simplicity of faith (see Table 4.4). This was followed closely by the strong moral values found in Islam and having had a personal, transformational experience, which tied for second and third place. The fourth most common reason was the allowance for intellectual religious study. Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual paths was in fifth place, although it was expected to have played a more prominent role in the decision to embrace Islam.

**Table 4.4**

**TOP FIVE REASONS FOR EMBRACING ISLAM (SEPARATELY FROM SUFISM)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total Votes out of 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Simplicity of faith</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>Personal transformational experience</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>Strong moral values found in Islam</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Allowance for intellectual religious study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The *murīds* were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for deciding to become Muslim. These are the results from 11 responses.

Three of the respondents noted on the survey that by embracing Islam, they were returning to the heritage of their ancestors, and two recalled their parents being encouraging of their conversions.42 Surprisingly, only one individual reported dissatisfaction with the dominant social and moral norms as one of the top reasons for becoming Muslim. This *murīd* explained that he or she had the desire for a “better understanding of how to worship Allah and prepare for [the] afterlife.” None self-reported that marriage or the supportive community were reasons for becoming Muslim. Most

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42 In contrast, one was rejected by her father after embracing Islam. For her, it was not considered a return to her ancestral heritage. (Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.)
likely, this was because it was a personal decision to embrace Islam, and several did not find their Muslim communities to be very supportive of them as converts.\textsuperscript{43}

Notably, the similarity of message to previous religious beliefs received only one survey response, differing dramatically from the murīds in the first category. A possible explanation is that the individuals in this category were more focused on the differences between their old and new religions. In support of this explanation, several indicated dissatisfaction with their previous religion. By embracing Islam, they ascribed to a simpler creed that provided clear moral guidance. In contrast, those in the first category placed greater emphasis on spirituality and were more likely to appreciate the similarities between the religions.

Among the murīds who were actively searching for an alternative religion, a number of them questioned the truth of what they were taught in church, especially concerning the relationship between God and Jesus. An example is Shafiya, who belonged to a Protestant church until her mother decided the family would become Catholic, a conversion which she resisted but could not escape.\textsuperscript{44} There were several issues in Catholicism that she did not agree with, specifically, she said, “I didn’t believe in confessing my sins to no man, and all those statues sitting up there.” Taking her beliefs to the street, Shafiya walked around her city with a poster that read: “Jesus is not God’s son.” Searching for answers, she looked into various religions, including the Jehovah’s Witnesses. She found that Islam was the only one that “told the truth.” As she sat reading books on Islam, she had a vision:

It seemed like my whole life was flashing across my eyes, and it was like everything that I went through in life, I had to go through it so I could get to that point. Then, after it stopped ... I felt like a new born baby on the floor, and I turned to [an acquaintance] and told him I wanted to go to the mosque and take the [shahāda].\textsuperscript{45}

She knew based on her reading and this life-changing experience that she wanted to become Muslim.

Similarly, Omar questioned what he was being taught in church.\textsuperscript{46} As a young boy, he remembered asking his Sunday-School teacher the reasons behind praying to

\textsuperscript{43} Haddad (2006, 38-40) notes the varying opinions held by those raised as Muslim toward converts to Islam, which includes discomfort and jealousy as well as pride. Also, racial issues may be occasionally encountered in Muslim communities.

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with “Shafiya,” November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\textsuperscript{45} Interview with “Shafiya,” November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\textsuperscript{46} Interview with “Omar,” September 20, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Jesus: “They were talking about Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, but I had heard that God was jealous. So, I asked a question: If God was a jealous god, then why are you asking me to call on his son? I got really rebuked.” As a young man, he heard the message of “One God” (Allah) while out on the street, and it resonated well with him:

I was getting my shoes shined and this brother was ‘popping,’ and we was talking. And he talked about one God. And, I stood up because this had been in my heart for all the way from a child. And I said, talk about it more, brother ... He started talking about one God, and that’s Allah. I had never heard anybody say anything like what I felt. It was in my heart since childhood.47

Omar experienced a difficult life growing up in the inner city. He was inspired by an individual who was talking about the Nation of Islam and went in search of this movement. During this time, he interacted with people who were involved in the Moorish Scientists and the Nationalists, both of which were movements aimed at building African American identity and pride. When Omar joined the Nation of Islam in the late 1960s, it was just before to the death of its founder, Elijah Muhammad, after which his son Warith Deen Mohammad initiated a turn toward mainstream, Sunni Islam.

Another example of someone who was dissatisfied with Christianity, but for different reasons, is Rabia.48 She had developed a strong, personal relationship with Jesus as her saviour and had an awareness of God’s reality through previous life-changing, spiritual experiences. However, she realised that there needed to be a wider view of salvation than presented by Christianity, and she found the churches to be too socially-oriented. Rabia was also dissatisfied by the ease of asking for forgiveness after committing a sin, and she expressed that she wanted to actually live as Jesus taught, but found no template in Christianity for every-day living that others upheld and which she could emulate. She began looking for an alternative religious movement. While working in a foreign country, Rabia tried communal living with the Mennonites, but found that way of life did not suit her. She remembers feeling frustrated and alone during that time.

Then, Rabia was given a Qur’an from someone at work who had previously embraced Islam. She had a powerful transformative experience while reading it during Ramadan. In the interview, she described how she felt that her heart opened to its message, and the following day, she took shahāda in front of witnesses. However, she struggled with the role of Jesus in Islam because of the personal relationship that she had

47 Interview with “Omar,” September 20, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
48 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
developed with him through Christianity. She met Shaykh Asaf in Rochester at a Ramadan dinner two days after taking the shahāda and asked him about the claim in the Bible that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one goes to heaven but through him (John 14:6). Shaykh Asaf confirmed that Jesus was “the way, the truth, and the life,” just like every prophet of God, and Rabia realised that her previous focus on Jesus had been a distraction from her relationship with God.

Amirah represents a very different conversion experience from the others mentioned previously because she recalled having been content with Christianity. Rambo’s (1993) conversion stages need to be shifted around to relate to Amirah’s experience because she did not experience a crisis of faith until after she encountered a gatekeeper to Islam. Amirah described herself as having been a “devout Christian” who was active in the church and sang in the church choir. While in High School, she became friends with the son of an imām, and it was through their discussions on religion that her thoughts began to change: “We would talk on the phone for hours, but it was all about Islam ... [At] four in the morning, we’re talking about Isa [Jesus], `alayhi salaam [peace be with him]. And the things he said made a lot of sense ... He intellectually got me wrapped up in it.” She started questioning, for instance, “why Christians pray to Jesus, who prayed to God.” Her interest in Islam was enhanced after meeting the imām and his extended family. During the interview, she described how a visit to the mosque and observing prayer solidified her decision to become Muslim:

I was like, Wow. This is religion. This is practicing religion. Where, in the church, it was mainly a huge church, you were just a number. You were your ... tithe [monetary donation], and so there was no real interaction with the minister or anything like that because the church was so big. So, this was real close, and people were learning a foreign language, and they actually prayed ... It was like, a whole body experience.

Amirah accepted Islam at the age of 18, but not as a result of looking for an alternative religion. She believed that God chose her to become a Muslim and expressed thankfulness for being guided to this faith.

For the murīds in this category, embracing Islam was not the conclusion of their conversion journeys. At some point, they were introduced to Sufism and decided to join

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49 Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
50 Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
51 This sort of language is common in conversion narratives. See also Brodbeck (2008, 93) who draws attention to this in her own narrative.
the Alami Tariqa. The following subsection elaborates on these intra-religious conversion experiences.

Joining the Tariqa

It is striking that more than one-third of the survey respondents had embraced Islam before becoming involved in the Alami Tariqa. Based on the research, the individuals who joined Sufism separately from embracing Islam either: 1) had a mystical experience that indicated that the tariqa was a spiritual path that could benefit them, or 2) thought involvement in the tariqa could satisfy something that was unfulfilled in their life circumstances. Those who had a mystical experience were not necessarily looking for anything different in their lives, but their experiences indicated that there was more to this life than what they understood. They realised that, as Farid al-Din Attar (1984) describes in The Conference of the Birds, there was a journey to go on, and they decided to pursue it. Those who were already searching for something were mainly looking for a more meaningful approach to Islam and a community in which to grow and to heal spiritually.

Nearly all the interviewees in this category indicated having initial scepticism toward the tariqa. Amirah had been Muslim for 20 years and was content with Islam and her involvement in the local Sunni mosque. When her sister-in-law encouraged her to meet Shaykh Asaf, she asked, “What’s wrong with just being Muslim?” Amirah was tentative also because of what sounded like “hocus pocus stuff” going on in Waterport, which was how she interpreted the kiramets (miracles) and extra-ordinary experiences relayed by her sister-in-law. Another individual who was sceptical was Rabia, who was introduced to Shaykh Asaf at a Ramadan dinner in Rochester, as previously discussed. She initially thought it might be a cult because, as she recalled, the murids wore strange robe-like outfits and tended to replicate the actions of Shaykh Asaf. She was also taken aback by their strange behaviour. For example, at one of the Sufi gatherings many of the women were knitting, and she remembers one repetitively asking to stir the peanut soup.

Omar also initially expressed doubt. Although he had read a little about Sufism, he did not connect his book knowledge with what his friends at the local mosque were

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52 This is not well documented in the literature. Among the limited literature on Muslims joining tariqas, I could not find any mention of others being initially sceptical of Sufism.
53 Interview with a murid, September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
54 Interview with a murid, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
55 Interview with a murid, September 20, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
describing in Waterport. He teased his friends, some of whom were already murīds of Shaykh Asaf, and gave them difficulty about following the orders of a shaykh.

These reactions beg the question: Why, then, did they join the tariqa? The survey responses show that the three most common reasons for becoming a murid were: 1) a personal, transformational experience, indicated by all but one, 2) desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God, and 3) charisma/leadership style of shaykh (see Table 4.5). Intellectual spiritual development was in fourth place. Following this, and tied for fifth place, were: spiritual healing and a supportive community of faith.

Dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms was not chosen, although one respondent indicated “other” on the survey and wrote about “desperately wanting more meaning to this life/ my life.”

Table 4.5

TOP FIVE REASONS FOR CONVERTS TO ISLAM TO BECOME MURIDS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total Votes out of 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Personal, transformational experience</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Intellectual spiritual development</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Supportive community of faith</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Spiritual healing</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The murīds were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for deciding to become murīds. These are the results from 11 responses.

As the survey results show, everyone but one respondent in this category was impacted by a personal, transformational experience. This may refer to a variety of occurrences including dreams, intuitions, spiritual experiences, and even something so personal and seemingly-small that it was only meaningful to the individual. Whatever they were, these experiences had an impact on these individuals’ lives and influenced their decisions to join the tariqa. The interviews provided two examples that shed light on this mystical conversion theme (Lofland and Skonovd 1981). Amirah, for instance, went to Waterport for a weekend gathering after being convinced by her sister-in-law to visit. The talks given by Shaykh Asaf touched her deeply, and she experienced an overwhelming feeling of release:

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 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.\(^{56}\)

Throughout the following week, Amirah felt as though a veil was opening, and she experienced the world in slow motion.\(^{57}\) She decided to make a space in her home for doing *dhikr* and cleaned out a storage room to serve as a prayer room. While she was repeating “*La ilaha illallah*” (There is no god but God), a loud impact vibrated the house. Looking around, she found no explanation. She attributed the violent noise to “Shaytan [Satan] leaving,” and it was at this point that she knew that the *tariqa* was for her. She was convinced by the uncontrollable crying, the feeling of increased clarity, and the unexplainable noise during *dhikr* that she needed to be involved in the *tariqa*. When the *shaykh* came to Cleveland shortly thereafter, in the mid-1980s, Amirah asked to become his *murīd*. She was convinced by the uncontrollable crying, the feeling of increased clarity, and the unexplainable noise during *dhikr* that she needed to be involved in the *tariqa*. When the *shaykh* came to Cleveland shortly thereafter, in the mid-1980s, Amirah asked to become his *murīd*. She knew that Shaykh Asaf was the right guide for her because of the love she felt and how he actualised Islam:

> It was an experience I had never felt before, and I had been Muslim since the 60s ... I felt Allah. I felt, I don’t know the words. I don’t know if these are the right words. I just knew that this is what I had to do. Shaykh Asaf was the deliverer or the message that I received ... The religion that I was in became real. It became real.\(^{58}\)

Shafiya also had mystical experiences which encouraged her to become a *murīd*.\(^{59}\) She initially was introduced to this *tariqa* while attending a gathering in Cleveland on invitation of a Muslim acquaintance, where she met a representative from the Waterport *tariqa* community. Shafiya remembered serving tea to those gathered, and this young man spoke to her, saying that it was “better to serve than to be served.” Backing up his statement, he served tea to those gathered later in the evening. After the gathering ended and Shafiya had returned home and gone to bed, strange things started happening in her room. As she described, “All these people seemed like they was coming out of the walls. You know? Faces of people I never seen before. I got afraid. I left on out of there.”

\(^{56}\) Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\(^{57}\) The veil is a common expression in Sufism. It is said that there are 70,000 veils between man and God that obscure the truth. See Maryam Kabeer Faye’s (2009) memoir *Journey through Ten Thousand Veils*.

\(^{58}\) Interview with “Amirah,” September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.

\(^{59}\) Interview with “Shafiya,” November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Having had mystical experiences throughout her life, this intrigued her, and she decided to visit the *tariqa* community.

Although she fell asleep on the ride to Waterport, as the car arrived, she woke up feeling as though she had “penetrated an invisible field.” When she interacted with Shaykh Asaf, he called her to the front of the room where he presented knowledge about her that she said he could not have known except by God’s intervention:

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.60

Shafiya became a *murid* shortly after this experience, having been convinced that this was the path for her and that Shaykh Asaf was her guide.

After embracing Islam, some felt unfulfilled and went in search of more within the Islamic tradition. They were influenced by life circumstances that primed them to be attracted to the community for spiritual healing and growth. This refers to Rambo’s (1993) context stage of conversion. For instance, Khateeja had been Muslim for about 20 years before being introduced to the *tariqa.*61 She found that she had become bored with the routine and was searching from mosque to mosque for something more meaningful. At the time of her introduction to the *tariqa*, Khateeja was attending a mosque with a large Pakistani population that did not meet her social and community needs because “they weren’t talking to dark-skinned people.”62 In addition, she was a mature, single woman, which is not always well accepted in Muslim communities.63 She had read about Sufism and remembered praying for something “esoteric” in her life.

Khateeja accepted an invitation from a friend to celebrate Eid in Waterport because “it was interesting, something else to do for the Eid instead of the norm.” Once there, she met Shaykh Asaf and Shaykh Jemali and was overwhelmed by the love that she felt from them and the *murids*. She described the Waterport community as being very different from the other Muslim communities she had visited in part because of their openness to people of various ethnicities. She knew that Shaykh Asaf was her guide

60 Interview with “Shafiya,” November 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
61 Interview September 5, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
62 Experiencing racial and other forms of prejudice from other Muslims is an occasional theme in conversion studies. See Köse (1996), Zebiri (2008), and Roald (2004, 2006). White converts are interpreted by some Muslims to be “trophies” compared to African converts (Haddad 2006, 40).
63 See Haddad (2006, 40) for more on how single women converts are sometimes mistreated by other Muslims.
because there was “something about him ... you know, just beams of good stuff, and it just touched my heart.” Khateeja took intisāb two weeks after her initial visit to Waterport. According to Lofland and Skonovd’s (1981) motifs, she had a strongly affectional intra-religious conversion experience.

Another example of someone who found herself looking for something more in Islam is Rabia. Soon after taking the shahāda, Rabia realised that by embracing Islam, she had experienced a religious transformation that did not fully satisfy her spiritual needs. Islam in the mosques had become ritualistic, and she was looking for something deeper and more spiritual:

I soon began to realise ... just going to jum‘a, 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 shahāda 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.

This experience is very similar to the reflections documented by Scottish convert to Islam, Ian Dallas (1972). After leaving his library job and travelling into the desert, where he embraced Islam, he reflected on his life: “What had I done? Had I merely exchanged one religion for another? Certainly the new one was preferable in its utter simplicity, in its theology and its rites, but I had experienced nothing outside the realm of thought and feeling ... I remained, without a doubt, the same troubled soul I had been at the Library” (Dallas 1972, 74).

In Shaykh Asaf’s teachings and khutbas (sermons), Rabia heard an answer to this dilemma. The day she met Shaykh Asaf, which was very soon after taking shahīda, he gave a muhabbet (discourse) at the Rochester Interfaith Chapel in a manner that apparently sounded like a “hellfire and brimstone Baptist preacher.” This immediately attracted Rabia because of her former Baptist affiliation. She found his muhabbets meaningful, informative, and inspiring. This was one reason that she continued to attend events led by Shaykh Asaf even though she held reservations concerning Sufism and the

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64 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
65 Interview with “Rabia,” January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
66 Interview with “Rabia,” January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y. In my experience, individuals pick up on different things when listening to Shaykh Asaf, as though he intentionally says things that are important for certain people. See Werbner (2007, 211), who also documents this in an exchange with a murīd of the Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Tariqa in Britain.
other murīds. Another reason was that she married the man who introduced her to Islam, and he had become a murīd of Shaykh Asaf.

While she was pregnant with their first child, Rabia experienced an overwhelming desire to be a part of the ṭariqa. However, Shaykh Asaf expressed hesitation. Later reflecting upon those events, she realised that she had needed to let go of that attachment before being invited to join the ṭariqa. This was likely to ensure that it was not a sporadic decision driven by transient, emotional needs. Immediately after she indicated having control over her desire, Shaykh Asaf accepted her as a murīd.

Part Three: Life-Long Muslims Who Joined the Tariqa

The 12 individuals in this category include both first-generation Muslim immigrants to America and those raised as Muslim by parents who are Alami murīds. In this category, there were notably more males (7) than females (2) who participated in the study, although three respondents did not disclose their genders. Only one of the three first generation Muslim immigrants living in or near Waterport participated in the survey and interviews, as indicated by the data. However, it is possible that another participated but did not disclose identifying information. Ten of the second generation murīds participated in the study, including three who were interviewed. They took intisāb between 1997 and 2008, between the ages of 17 and 24. Currently, no Muslims born in America have joined the ṭariqa unless they had parents who were murīds.

The murīds who were raised Muslim went through two intra-religious conversions. The first was when they personally decided to practice Islam, and the second when they joined the ṭariqa. These conversions are referred to as an “intensifying of religious beliefs and practices” (Rambo and Farhadian 1999, 23). For the Muslim immigrants, joining the ṭariqa additionally meant “changing from one group to another within a tradition,” Rambo and Farhadian’s (1999, 23) second type of conversion. Similar to the second category of murīds discussed above, the main Sufi motif of these murīds was the transformation towards being an actual Muslim, in name and intention (Hermansen 1999, 76).

The murīds with parents in the Alami Tariqa grew up taking part in the community activities in Waterport, and they already had a sense of loyalty to this ṭariqa. Many of these second generation murīds took intisāb because it was a logical next step in their spiritual development and was a way to strengthen their relationship with Shaykh.
Asaf. In contrast, those who moved to the tariqa community later were more likely to question the validity of Sufism and look into other Islamic traditions. Gilliant-Ray (1999, 317) notes that intra-religious conversions typically do not involve a crisis and quest, since they usually involve a shift from religious indifference to having a deeper understanding and desire to participate of one’s own accord. However, as this study clearly indicates, a crisis and quest can be part of inter-religious conversions.

Joining the Tariqa

Similar to the other two categories of murids, the two most common reasons for taking intisâb were: 1) desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God and 2) a personal transformational experience (see Table 4.6). Tied for third and fourth places were intellectual spiritual development and spiritual healing. The fifth most common reason was the charisma/leadership style of the shaykh. Only two participants indicated that they were dissatisfied with the dominant social and moral norms – one adding that he or she had compared the lives of the shaykh and murids to other Americans and the differences had encouraged him or her to take intisâb. Although it was anticipated that family and community expectation would play a role in the decision to become a murid, none of the survey respondents indicated this in their top five reasons. There appears to be an understanding amongst the community members that taking intisâb is not the best lifestyle choice for everyone, which limits external pressures on the non-murids to become murids. Taking intisâb is recognised as a personal decision which is agreed upon between the shaykh and the individual.

Table 4.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Total Votes out of 12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Personal transformational experience</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Intellectual spiritual development</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/4</td>
<td>Spiritual healing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The murids were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for deciding to become murids. These are the results from 12 responses.
The murīds in this category had very different experiences leading up to taking intisāb, which is likely related to how much time they spent growing up in the Sufi community and exposure to Muslims of different traditions. Their experiences ranged between eagerly wanting to become a murīd, searching within Islam for other paths before returning to this ʿtariqa, and being initially strongly opposed to Sufism. In the later two cases, apparently unexplainable mystical experiences played an important role in providing personal proof of legitimacy.

Those who grew up in the Waterport community were likely to take intisāb as a logical next step. A common experience among second generation murīds can be summarised by a somewhat humorous response to the survey: “Like the vacuum cleaner, I just got sucked into it.” These individuals grew up knowing Shaykh Asaf and felt familiarity with Sufism. They did not necessarily search for another spiritual path because they were already part of one. Becoming a murīd solidified their commitment to Islam and furthered their relationship with Shaykh Asaf. As one wrote on the survey, “I was offered [intisāb], and out of my love for the shaykh and awareness of the honour of such an invitation, I accepted it. Only later would I come to appreciate the challenges and rewards of the path.” Another survey respondent wrote about wanting to have a greater connection to God and to be “tempered into a stronger person.”

Ismail’s parents are murīds, and he grew up in the Waterport ʿtariqa community. During the interview, he recalled feeling strongly about becoming a murīd when he was nine or 10, but he knew that he needed to be older before he could take intisāb. He considered his prior involvement in the community to have been influential his decision to join the ʿtariqa. Growing up around the other murīds, he observed their actions and tried to emulate them. As he said, “It was something that I always knew I wanted, even at a young age, and what I was working towards as the next stage of what I just need to do, not college, not school, but [becoming a murīd] was the next progression of whatever was going to happen in my life. That was an important hurdle.” He also wanted to deepen his relationship with Shaykh Asaf and understood that becoming a murīd would facilitate this.

Another example is Selma, who also grew up in Waterport with parents who are murīds. For her, interactions with non-Muslims in the local area and observing the
A shy, young woman, Selma explained during the interview that she was the only Muslim female attending the small, rural public High School in a nearby town. Although she did not wear anything to distinguish herself as a Muslim and had a similar complexion to most of the other students, they knew she was different because of her name, and she was labelled as “the Muslim girl.” Since she was not well accepted by her peers, Selma went through a time of questioning herself. She wondered if they would be more accepting of her if she renounced Islam. However, she decided that her faith was more important than fitting in: “I didn’t end up [giving up Islam] because I would feel too bad about not saying my prayers, and I would feel like I was sabotaging myself for the acceptance from these people who, in the end, really didn’t matter at all.” Selma decided that it was better to continue practicing Islam, even if it meant additional difficulties because of peer pressure.

It was also during this time that Selma became frustrated with American society, especially the focus on a person’s image instead of quality of character or relationship with God. She realised that what she wanted out of life could not be fulfilled by popularity or worldly success. Looking at Shaykh Asaf and other murīds, she was attracted to the steadiness they exuded and their ability to stay centred and focused in the midst of life’s challenges. Although Selma always thought she would become a murīd, the aspiration was realised, and within two months of expressing desire to join the tariqa, she did so, at the age of 19. She credited her family for being good role models and helping her to remain strong in Islam even when she encountered adversity.

The murīds who were introduced to the tariqa later in life, including the one who immigrated and another who moved to Waterport during his childhood, were more likely to experience a crisis of faith and experiment with alternative Islamic philosophies during the time before becoming a murīd. Their experiences are somewhat similar to the experiences of the murīds discussed in the second category, those who embraced Islam before being introduced to the tariqa. Often, unexplainable mystical events helped to convince these individuals that the tariqa was legitimate and would benefit their practice of Islam. Although undocumented by this study, it is possible that being in secular, American society influenced the immigrants toward joining the tariqa for the guidance and supportive Islamic community.

Isa moved to Waterport at the age of eight or nine with some of his family members, one of whom was a murīd of Shaykh Asaf. Although he was raised Muslim, it

70 Interview with “Isa,” September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
was not until he attended college outside of the area and interacted with other Muslims that he decided to pray regularly and try to emulate the example of the Prophet Muhammad. During this time, he encountered individuals who considered Sufism to be *bid‘a* (innovation) and caused him to question the validity of Sufism. With this, he experienced a crisis that initiated a quest to find “true” Islam. It climaxed when Isa did not feel he could return to Waterport because he was wary of the *tariqa*. Although he did not question the message of Islam, Isa questioned the ability of humankind to correctly interpret it.

Travelling around the world over the next five or so years, Isa interacted with individuals of various backgrounds, and he experimented with a number of Islamic ideologies. These included the scholars at Shaykh Hamza Yusuf’s Zaytuna Institute in California and the Salafis. Impressed by the Salafis, Isa said, “I used to go to *tarāwīh* [evening prayers during Ramadan] with them, and I really ... loved listening to the *sīra* [biography] of the Prophet Muhammad from their angle because it just seemed like their wealth of knowledge and the firmness of some of those brothers was admirable.” Isa also participated in the Tablighi Jama’at in India for about four months, which he described during the interview as critical for his return to the Alami Tariqa:

> 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 *madhhab*, 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.71

During his time with the Tablighi Jama‘at, Isa not only learned about the virtues of the Sufis and some of their practices, but he also became aware that the highly respected scholars of Islam, those who had the ability to make correct interpretations and were active in the community, had experiences or connections with the “science of Tasawwuf,” even if not overtly. Eventually, Isa came to understand Sufism as an essential part of being Muslim, and he was able to return to Waterport.

Having lived part of his life in the Waterport community, Isa described in the interview how he “already felt part of it” and that already having a relationship and

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71 Interview with “Isa,” September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
“respect and love for Shaykh Asaf” put him in an ideal position to join this tarīqa. However, he still questioned whether the Alami Tariqa was the best tarīqa for him and wondered whether he would benefit more from a different Sufi tradition or teacher.

After some time, however, Isa realised that Shaykh Asaf was already guiding him and playing an important role in his spiritual development. For example, after a particular talk by Shaykh Asaf, Isa said, “that talk kept coming up, and the things that he was saying kept being strangely relevant and important and helping me make decisions that I was making” throughout the following year. Also, Isa kept dreaming of Shaykh Asaf. This included an extremely vivid dream in which Shaykh Asaf visited him in Delhi, India, to make sure he was safe and content with the Tablighi Jama’at. A few years later, in 2004, Isa went to a Sufi gathering in Denmark where Shaykh Asaf was speaking about the tribulations of the coming times, and it became clear to Isa in a moment of intense awareness that he needed to be a murīd of Shaykh Asaf. By the following year, he had joined the Alami Tariqa.

Unlike the previous murīds, Ahmed moved to America in the mid-1980s, was introduced to Shaykh Asaf during an event held in Waterport. Although he had a strong dislike of Sufism and was against the tariqas “probably more than anybody else,” he became a murīd almost two years later. Ahmed realised from his interactions with Shaykh Asaf that “he wasn’t just a regular imām. You know, he’s human, but he also has some divine unity with God.” This dramatic change of opinion was assisted by an experience which demonstrated to him that Shaykh Asaf was legitimate. Ahmed had come to visit Waterport during the winter, and he was unprepared for the freezing temperatures at the tekiya, which is unheated. He recalled being extremely cold until Shaykh Asaf approached him and rubbed his back. As a result, Ahmed became warm and, incredibly, began to sweat. This unexplainable experience helped to solidify both his trust in Shaykh Asaf and awareness of Sufism as a legitimate path in Islam.

For Ahmed, being in the tariqa is not any different from living the life that every Muslim should be living. Although Shaykh Asaf is important to him, he explained during the interview, “I am not in this path for Shaykh Asaf, and I’m not in this path for not being with Shaykh Asaf ... I’m in this path because I love the Prophet. That’s the reason I’m here.” He recognised that being in the tariqa could benefit his practice of Islam and help him live according to the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and that was his main inspiration for becoming a murīd.

72 Interview with “Ahmed,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Discussion

Although the literature indicates joining an Islamic *tariqa* as a way of rejecting normative Western culture, very few survey respondents reported dissatisfaction with societal norms within the top five motivational factors. It only received two of the possible 35 votes. Of the two respondents, one noted being dissatisfied with the competitive, sexual and business-oriented culture of the West. This *murid* had embraced Islam in connection with joining the *tariqa*. The second *murid*, who was raised in Waterport, indicated having compared the lives of Shaykh Asaf and the *murids* to those outside the *tariqa* and, based on this, deciding to pursue a spiritual life through the *tariqa* instead of going after materialistic goals. Instead of dissatisfaction, the two most common reasons for joining the *tariqa* were based on personal, transformational experiences and a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God (see Tables 4.3 and 4.5). This suggests that a majority of the *murids* were not looking for an alternative cultural movement, nor were they strongly motivated by dislike or discontentedness with Western culture.

This contradicts the findings of Köse (1996, 194), who states plainly that the British Sufi converts in his study “rejected Western culture.” He draws a connection between conversion to Islam and dissatisfaction with secular society, including the pursuit of power, money, and gratifying sexual desires (Köse 1996, 78). Also, Jawad (2006, 156-157) discusses that individuals who feel excluded from normative culture may be empowered by joining Islamic movements. Kate Zebiri (2008, 52) suggests that converts are particularly well positioned to provide critiques of both Western society and Islamic society because of their “double marginality.”

Although the vast majority of research participants did not self-report dissatisfaction as a primary motivation, many of their conversion narratives contained elements of discontentedness. The emptiness of life without knowing God, which may be manifested in feelings of dissatisfaction with “normal” Western life and not relating to the material desires and goals of others, is often very influential in the spiritual quest.73 Perhaps, though, once the individual comes to the point of deciding to join a *tariqa*, dissatisfaction with cultural norms is not as important as at the beginning of the search.

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73 Rabia Christine Brodbeck (2008) is a world-famous dancer born in Switzerland who embraced Islam and joined a *tariqa*. In her memoir, she relays how empty and alone she felt because she was not satisfied by the consumer-driven, materialistic life nor by her friends, whom she observed as unable to “fulfill each other’s needs as friends [and so] we became very busy constantly discussing art events, politics, cultural movements” (2008, 92).
These findings confirm that the Alami Tariqa is more world-accommodating than world-rejecting. Shaykh Asaf has attempted to establish a tariqa that blends with the local culture while upholding Muslim ideals, rather than focussing on the behaviour considered immoral and harmful. If someone is looking for an alternative cultural movement, he or she is more likely to join a religious movement that requires more extreme changes in dress and behaviour than this tariqa, which has accommodated to the local setting in many regards.

Although this study did not confirm dissatisfaction with Western society as a major reason for joining the tariqa, it did find elements of it among the murīds. When asked on the survey whether they would describe themselves as American, 23 agreed that they would, while eight replied that they would not, and one answered both “yes and no.” The short answers demonstrated differing concepts of what it means to identify as an American including residency, nationalism, loyalty, patriotism, and identifying with common values. A respondent wrote, “I am a citizen of both U.S. and Canada. If you mean a patriot who unquestioningly follows government policy – No, I am not American.” Some expressed dismay with government policies and the predominant values in the West.74 Alternatively, one who answered affirmatively wrote, “If one doesn’t take ownership of the country, then there is nothing gained,” and another remarked positively about the freedoms upheld in America.

Interestingly, among the 21 research participants who had embraced Islam (through Sufism or otherwise), the second most common reason specified on the survey for doing so was the strong moral values found in Islam (see Tables 4.2 and 4.4). This indicates that many of them appreciated the Islamic moral and ethical code, which greatly differs from the practices common in Western society. Köse (1996, 193-194) also found that that those who joined Islamic Sufism had been attracted to Islam because of its moral values and the companionship it offered of similar-minded individuals. Since the religious conversions of the murīds in the present study occurred after adolescence, with the range being between 18 and 37 years and the average age being 28, this supports the theory that they were not rebellious conversions, but decisions based on mature thinking and moral considerations, as Köse (1996, 54, 65) also discusses regarding those in his study.

74 The U.S. presidency changed from George W. Bush to Barak 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.
It was clear from the survey’s short answers that meeting and interacting with Shaykh Asaf factored prominently into the decision to take intisāb. This was anticipated because if there had not been a connection between the individual and the shaykh, the individual would likely not have joined this tariqa. However, charisma appears to have factored more significantly in the decision for those who were previously non-Muslim than those who were raised Muslim. This may be because most of those who were raised Muslim grew up in the Sufi community, having a high level of familiarity with the shaykh.

One survey respondent wrote very frankly that he or she took intisāb because “it was Shaykh Asaf and what he talked about.” Another murid expanded on the same sentiment, writing that he or she joined this tariqa because of:

The need for guidance, which I had looked for in my original path, Judaism, and found lacking. The shaykh demonstrated deep and inspired knowledge that was beyond the intellect or individual personality. This is a connection that can be felt by the heart but is hard to describe in words. The shaykh manages to have a detailed and specific knowledge of my needs and how best to help me in my quest for knowledge.75

The survey responses highlight the shaykh’s function as a role model for the murids: “I felt my murshid [teacher] had totally surrendered to Allah, and I needed to be with him to learn to submit myself.” These demonstrate the importance of choosing a spiritual guide who is inspired and rightly guided and shows the intimate spiritual relationship that develops between the shaykh and murid. The central role of the shaykh was also found by Lassen (2009, 154) in his study of Germans who joined the Burhaniya Tariqa: “When I asked one veteran if she could confirm that first came Sufism, then came Islam, she corrected me: ‘first came the shaykh.’” The search for the “right” guide is a critical aspect for many seeking spiritual fulfilment.

This study confirms that it is common for Westerners to have experimented with a number of religions and spiritual paths prior to embracing Islamic Sufism (Köse 1996, 194; Hermansen 2006a, 29). This was particularly common for those in the first category of murids. They experimented with a wide variety of New Age, Eastern, and even a Native American religion, in addition to Christian denominations and Jewish movements. In contrast, the murids in the second category did not report trying any New Age or Eastern religions. Instead, they looked into Christian denominations and alternative

75 Survey response.
religions inspired by Islam, including the Moorish Temple and the Nation of Islam, before coming to Sunni Islam. These two categories represent different kinds of seekers, and their conversion narratives demonstrate this. Since those in the second category were mostly African American, they were more likely to be drawn directly to Islam as an acceptable alternative religion, whereas the *murīds* in the first category were more often attracted to alternative movements that emphasised universal mysticism instead of directly to Islam, although there are exceptions.

It appears that ancestral backgrounds impact the avenue through which a Western individual joins Islamic Sufism. At a very intimate level, ethnicity plays an important part in shaping an individual’s identity by influencing experiences, interpersonal relations, role models, hopes, and fears. Individuals with European ancestral backgrounds tend to be attracted to the universal spirituality found in Sufism and initially embrace Islam due to an interest in joining the *tariqa*. All except for two European-American *murīds* in this study followed this avenue. This study found that over time, these individuals may come to identify more closely with the other elements of Islam, but not necessarily. For example, one *murīd* relayed that he does not feel any special benefit from the five daily prayers, but continues to pray them because they are required by the faith.76

In contrast, it was found that individuals with African ancestral backgrounds typically came to Sufism after embracing Islam. Several African Americans in the present study were Muslim for about 20 years before joining the *tariqa*. Embracing Islam may be considered a way of honouring the African heritage and returning to their ethnic religion, which was often forcibly denied to African American slaves (Hermansen 2004, 43).77 Islam teaches that all individuals are equal, regardless of race or socioeconomic status, and this is a powerful, empowering ideology. It also has the potential to connect individuals across the world through membership in the Islamic *ummah*. Three of the seven African Americans in the present study indicated that their conversions represented a return to their ancestral heritage, and two noted that their parents had been supportive of their decisions. There are a number of well-known African Americans who embraced Islam and may serve as role models including the late Malcolm X (previously known as Malcolm Little),78 notable former member of the Nation of Islam; Mohammad Ali

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76 Interview with a *murīd*, September 9, 2009. Waterport, N.Y.
77 At least 15 percent of Africans brought to America during the Slave Trade were Muslims (Austin 1984). See Alex Haley’s (1976) novel *Roots* about Muslim slaves in America (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company).
(Cassius Clay), boxing world champion, and Abdul-Karim al-Jabbar (Sharman Shah), NBA basketball player.

In the present study, the African Americans who joined the tariqa were often looking for a more meaningful, spiritual approach to Islam and an inclusive community. Finding a supportive community of faith ranked among the top five reasons for deciding to become a murîd, in contrast to the other two categories of murîds, for whom it played more of a minor role. Other tariqas in America which tend to attract African Americans are the Tijani Tariqa, Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa, and Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship (Hermansen 1998, 166).

It is suggested that Sufism has particular appeal among women because of its appreciation of and emphasis on the feminine (Jawad 2006, 162-163).79 Often, Western women who are disenchanted by the religion of their upbringing are attracted to Sufism as a tradition in which they are respected and empowered to pursue an unmediated relationship with God (Haddad 2006, 37; Smith 1999, 72). Although the present study found almost equal numbers of female and male murîds in the tariqa (ratio of 25:28), there were significantly more women than men (ratio of 8:3) among the individuals in the second category, who had embraced Islam previously to joining the tariqa. Since all the African American murîds who participated in this study are found in this category, the results imply that more African American women are drawn to Sufism after embracing Islam than their male counterparts. African American women, who particularly struggle to find respect and equality in American society, may be attracted to Sufism because of its appreciation of the feminine, and these women may have been specifically drawn to the Alami Tariqa because of its inclusive approach to both gender and ethnic issues.

It appears to be uncommon for Muslims born in America to join Sufi tariqas. Gisela Webb (1994, 76) mentions “born Muslims” participating in the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, but this refers to immigrants who followed Bawa to America from Sri Lanka, not Muslims born in America who became murîds. Similarly, Trix (1994, 374) states that all but two “inner members” of the Bektashi Tariqa in Detroit, Michigan, were emigrants from the Balkans. The exceptions were individuals born in America, but she does not indicate whether they were raised Muslim or embraced Islam later in life. The Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa is likely to attract Muslims because of its focus on Islam and emphasis on ethnic identity. However, Shaykh Hisham provoked conflict (fitna) with the Muslims in 1999 during a State Department Open Forum when he declared that 80

79 The actual participation of women in traditional Sufi tariqas varies greatly based on the tariqa (Hermansen 2006).
percent of the mosques in America were influenced by Islamic extremism (Damrel 2006, 120-121). This public statement led to Muslim boycotts and defamation of this *tariqa* and likely decreased the number of Muslims becoming *murids* of the Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa. The present study also suggests that it may be uncommon for American-born Muslims join Sufi *tariqas*. In the Alami Tariqa, thus far, no Muslims born in America have joined except those who had familial connections to it.

Conclusions

This study found three main avenues through which individuals join an Islamic Sufi *tariqa*. A common experience, particularly among European-Americans, was to be interested in elements of Sufism and embrace Islam as a result of desiring to join the *tariqa*, as discussed in Part One. Karin van Nieuwkerk (2006, 5) confirms that “a considerable number of people first convert to Sufism and then to Islam.” However, as noted earlier, many with interest in Sufism do not embrace Islam (Hermansen 2000, Smith 1999, 69). An alternative avenue to Islamic Sufism, as presented in Part Two, is for individuals to embrace Islam and later join a *tariqa*. This is a particularly common occurrence among African Americans, as Hermansen (1998, 166) suggests and the present study agrees. Additionally, Muslims living in Western societies may join Sufi *tariqas* which adhere to Islam, as discussed in Part Three.

It is striking that the top five reasons for joining the Alami Tariqa were nearly identical across the three categories of *murids*. Regardless of different religious, ancestral, and cultural backgrounds, they were drawn to this *tariqa* most often because of a desire for a deeper certainty of God and as a result of experiencing personal, mystical events. In addition, the charisma and leadership of the *shaykh*, and opportunities for intellectual spiritual development and spiritual healing were significant factors in the decision. The supportive community of faith was often an important factor for those who had embraced Islam prior to joining the *tariqa*. The literature confirms that Sufism often draws non-Muslims who are seeking spiritual fulfilment (Jawad 2006, 160; Weismann 2007b, 167) and “experiential modes of spirituality” (Hermansen 2004, 38). Although artistic

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80 The dominant form of Islam in America is Sunni conservatism, not traditionalism. It is common for mosques to provide free Islamic literature and translations of original texts. These are sponsored by international support, such as Saudi Arabia and contributions from many other Islamic countries. The Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) are two organisations of many that coordinate activities of the general Muslim community in America by publishing literature, maintaining websites, organising local and national activities, and maintaining dialogue with non-Muslim individuals and organisations.
elements, such as sacred music and whirling, are often presented as attractive for non-Muslims (Smith 1999, 69), they are not integral parts of the traditions of this tariqa and were not discussed in this research. The next chapter explores four common ascetic practices of the Alami Tariqa.
CHAPTER FIVE

Ascetic Spiritual Practices

O God!

If I worship Thee from fear of Hell,
burn me in Hell.

And if I worship Thee from hope of Paradise,
exclude me from Paradise.

But if I worship Thee for Thine own sake,
withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty!

– Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya¹

Those on the Sufi path are sometimes considered impatient because they desire to experience the reality of God prior to death.² As Rabi’a indicates in her famous quote above, Sufis strive to eliminate attachments such that they may devote their lives to God and love Him without ulterior motives. This necessitates a spiritual self-transformation, which is believed to be greatly aided by ascetic practices.

This chapter aims to increase awareness of what it means to be a murīd by describing selected ascetic practices of the Alami Tariqa. Likewise, it hopes to shed light on the pursuit of a religious lifestyle in modern America. Following a discussion of asceticism in Sufism, the chapter delves into four ascetic practices which are intended to bring the murīds of the Alami Tariqa closer to personal awareness and certainty of God. These include: 1) remembrance (dhikr), 2) seclusion (khalwat), 3) self-examination (muhāsaba), and 4) the annual commemoration of Ashura. These were chosen based on their importance in this tariqa and their potential benefits for the literature on Sufi practices. After providing a description of the practice, the study includes contemporary discussions and impressions relayed by the murīds that briefly explore the personal

¹ This verse is recorded by many sources. For example, see Asghar Ali Engineer’s (2005) The Qur’an, Women, and the Modern Society (Berkshire: New Dawn Press Group).
² See, for example, the Forward of Essential Sufism, edited by Fadiman and Frager (1997) and written by Houston Smith.
meanings and impacts of the exercises. This chapter is informed by ethnographic field-research, interviews, and surveys, in addition to academic literature.

Asceticism (Zuhd) and Sufism

Asceticism is described as “voluntary, sustained, and at least a partially systematic program of self-discipline and self-denial in which immediate, sensual, or profane gratifications are renounced in order to attain a higher spiritual state or a more thorough absorption in the sacred” (Kaelber 1987, 442). In Arabic, it is translated as zuhd, and it is considered essential for the initial stages of Islamic mysticism because it cultivates “the purification and self-control necessary for spiritual illumination” (Esposito 2003, 26).

While it may be common to conceptualise an ascetic as someone who renounces the world and lives in a cave or a secluded monastery, this is only one expression of asceticism. Max Weber (2003, 194), identified two types of ascetic movements: ausserweltliche, “worldly,” and innerweltliche, “otherworldly,” according to Talcott Parson’s translation. The otherworldly philosophy espouses a withdrawal from society, and this often involves monastic living dedicated to private devotions and spiritual exercises. On the other hand, ausserweltliche or worldly asceticism entails living an austere life, but not rejecting civilisation. In this case, devotions and spiritual exercises are performed in addition to other civic and familial responsibilities. Therefore, asceticism can be practiced in the caves of the Himalayan Mountains (Van der Veer 2009), in the bustling city of London (Geaves 2000), and in the small, American village of Waterport.

Among the various ascetic exercises practiced across religious affiliations, there are two basic forms. They are identified as physical and inner asceticism (Kaelber 1987, 442). Physical ascetic practices include: fasting, sexual restraint, poverty, seclusion, and self-inflicted pain, either physical or mental. Alternatively, inner asceticism involves the spiritual discipline of distancing the self from the world in general, but it does not target specific pleasures or attachments. In practice, the physical and inner forms are intertwined because most ascetic exercises involve both physical and spiritual aspects.

In Sufism, asceticism is one of the main tools used to facilitate spiritual and religious development (Rauf 2008, 591). It helps the practitioner reach the state of īḥsān,

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3 In Weber’s assessment, worldly asceticism was necessary for development of the modern (capitalist) society.
or excellence and perfect virtue, and come into greater harmony with what is pleasing to God. According to a well-known hadith, iḥṣān refers to worshipping God as though actually aware of His presence (Bukhari 2:48). Ascetic practices assist in this spiritual transformation by training the mind and body to remember God and reminding the soul of its submission to God.⁴ They also help the practitioner to recognise and gain control of the nafs (lower self, ego). This is often associated with removing veils or “polishing the heart” such that it is like a mirror in which the divine essence is reflected (Schimmel 1975, 4). As a hadith relates, the Prophet Muhammad said, “There is a polish for everything that takes the rust away, and the polish for the heart is the remembrance of Allah” (Bukhari).⁵

Referring to the teachings of Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Shaykh Asaf relayed that asceticism in Sufism is practiced based on three principles: 1) the material world is transient, 2) there are stations of existence more lasting than the material world, and 3) restraint from the world will help someone partake in the abundances of the world without being affected by them, while engaging in the world with greed will not bring satisfaction or assist in avoiding destiny (maktoob).⁶ A famous Sufi saying states, “Sufism means that you own nothing and are owned by nothing” (Ernst 1997, 23). These are universal principles that can bridge interfaith differences and are common for humankind.

At its essence, Sufism is a mystical tradition, and the ultimate desired outcome of ascetic spiritual practices is to experience the reality of God. This occurs through the transformational process of spiritual self-elimination and becoming lost in God (fanā’) or, as the famous Sufi saying advises, “Die before you die.” Al-Junaid briefly explains, “God should cause thee to die from thyself and live in Him.”⁷ The final symbolic “veil” to be lifted between the devotee and God is the “sense of separateness that we each carry” (Fadiman and Frager 1997, 243). This is the individuality, the “I,” which is meaningless in the presence of God.

This process of transformation is sometimes expressed in Islamic terminology as a symbolic journey that starts on secure land (ṣaraṭ‘a, sacred law).⁸ To make spiritual progress, the seeker must step away from the shore and chart a course (tariqa, path) by

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⁴ This refers to the premordial meeting in Islamic eschatology when all souls bowed to God and acknowledged Him as Lord.
⁶ Discussion with Shaykh Asaf, July 27, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
⁷ Citation of excerpt from al-Qushayri, Risāla, pg. 126, quoted in Arberry (1969, 58).
⁸ Shaykh Asaf considers the adherence to Islamic principles necessary for making progress in the Sufi path.
boat into the unknown ocean (haqq, truth). The seeker must then leave the relative safety of the boat and dive into the ocean’s depths in search of the pearl (ma’ rifâ, gnosis). In the end, the few who find the pearl “understand that they have reached only what was already in themselves” (Schimmel 1975, xvii). Like the birds in Farid al-Din Attar’s (1984) analogy, the seeker is transformed through this spiritual journey in a way that is often likened to the alchemy of base elements into gold. As Buturovic (2010) summarises, “The path to God is open to anyone ready for the arduous process of spiritual unveiling; the final goal is the annihilation of the human self in the divine self.”

This transformational process is facilitated by having a guide who is personally well-versed with the spiritual struggle. Rumi wrote in the Mathnawi (3: 588), “If anybody goes on the way without a leader, every two day’s journey becomes one of 100 years.” In another analogy, Shaykh Ragip Robert Frager (1997, 23-24) of the Jerrahi Tariqa compares the spiritual transformation to a medical procedure: “Seekers need teachers because few have the knowledge of spiritual medicine they need to cure themselves ... It might be possible to diagnose oneself and even treat simple problems, but one cannot operate on oneself.”

An important teaching component of Sufism is personal experience, which provides clarity about the self, the nature of the world, and God’s reality. Highlighting this aspect, al-Junayd is quoted as saying, “We learned Sufism not through words but through hunger, the renunciation of this world, and through depriving ourselves from the things which we are accustomed to and in which we take delight” (Qushayri 2007, 43). Fasting, for example, is believed to facilitate recognition of which parts of the self are not in submission to God, and it slows natural reactions, providing a moment to reconsider one’s actions (Ashraf 1987, 119). Personal experiences are believed to help the individual spiritually mature and develop desirable characteristics. Amir commented on this during the interviews:

The purpose of being in the tariqa is to take you from the formal religion to haqq [truth], the experience of God. The human being has to develop qualities that may not be developed prior to that, like patience and trust and sacrifice and on and on and on. The shaykh is there, constantly throwing you into situations where the end product is not the situation itself but to develop those qualities of being that, hopefully, will lead one to surrender to God.11

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9 It is considered difficult to make spiritual progress without delving into the inner meanings of the Islamic rituals.
11 Interview with a murid, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Sometimes these experiences happen naturally, while other times the shaykh plays a role in orchestrating them, at which point the teaching is identified as an irshād. Learning through experiences is sometimes difficult because it is often uncomfortable to acknowledge the truth in a lesson. Rabia spoke during the interview about personal experience and the value of having a shaykh to help the murīd learn and make spiritual progress:

> Because [Sufism is] an experiential path and because you can’t reach knowledge before you know something in your bones ... when you know something in your bones, then you have something to say because of that pain. And, it’s only by that pain that you come to know yourself, really, and yourself in relation to what you say your goal is, which is to come closer to God. But, only a living teacher can do that ... In [Sufism], there’s only one option, and the only option is to see yourself and to see your attachment.  

The spiritual journey is often accompanied by mystical experiences which give glimpses into God’s reality and often facilitate spiritual progress. Annemarie Schimmel (1975, 4) explains: “The reality that is the goal of the mystic ... cannot be understood or explained by any normal mode of perception ... A spiritual experience that depends upon neither sensual nor rational methods is needed.” These visions, dreams, and other experiences are described by mystic Sophy Burnham (1997, 6) as “little chocolates tossed out to encourage us on the Way.” Often, they consist of fleeting moments of extraordinary awareness until the seeker reaches the point of constant awareness of the oneness of God. As Shaykh Asaf said, “Less of the attachments to the phenomenal world brings more of the freedom in the supernatural world.”

The murīd (literally meaning: one who is willing) progresses through various maqāms (spiritual stations) and ḥāls (spiritual states). Although individual effort is considered the catalyst for transcending through the stations, it is God who moves an individual through the spiritual states. In the literature, a number of shaykhs and scholars share their interpretations of the maqāms and ḥāls. While Shaykh Asaf has not publicly discussed them, he published a book entitled The Sufi Code of Conduct (2004), which presents his interpretation of the correct behaviour and ethics required of his murīds to

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12 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010. Waterport, N.Y.
13 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, September 13, 2011.
progress through the stations and states. It ends with number 100, which is love: “That love unites the Universe, the planets, and the stars. Love of God is the entire meaning of the code, because all of the code leads us to abandon anything less than love. Love is the highest state, and nothing comes beyond love” (Shaykh Asaf 2004, 324).

While the highest levels of awareness of God are believed to have been easily attained by those in the direct presence of the Prophet Muhammad, with the passing of time it has become increasingly difficult to reach these states. Shaykh al-Hadith Muhammad Zakariya (2009, 43) suggests that the ṭariqas have adjusted to the needs of modern society and devised specific exercises to facilitate progress toward greater awareness of God. This concept is reflected in Ron Geaves’ (2006, 104) definition of Sufism as “a systematised method of bringing the practitioner into an alignment or correspondence with Allah, which is portrayed in terms of union or communion with the unity of the one God.”

The supplementary exercises performed by Sufis have come under attack by Muslim reformists as being bid’a (innovation). This criticism includes the spiritually-inspired practices which lack a historical or Qur’anic base, in addition, often, to those which expand on the established obligatory duties with a similar intent and are considered acceptable by most Muslims (van Bruinessen and Howell 2007, 7). For example, listening to music (samā’) for spiritual purposes and performing dhikr are not permitted or approved of by many reformists. Michael Frishkopf (2009, 54), professor of music at the University of Alberta who invited a highly respected Egyptian Qur’anic reciter and vocal artist to Edmonton, Canada, aptly reflected on the mixed Muslim reaction: “In this era and an immigrant social context ... it is ‘islām’ (outward ritual performance) that prevails over ‘īmān’ (inner faith) and ‘iḥsān’ (the continual awareness of God), [in other words] ... it is ‘fear’ that prevails over ‘hope.’”

Shaykh Asaf is also against innovations being initiated into Islam. As he plainly states, “To introduce a new ritual would be unIslamic, it would be bid’a” (Shaykh Asaf 2004, 228). Many of the common practices of Sufis, including dhikr circles, are believed to have been taught by the Prophet Muhammad to his Companions, who then passed on these traditions through the ṭariqas silsilas (spiritual lineages). Therefore, they are considered to be legitimate spiritual exercises and based on the sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. However, Shaykh Asaf (2004, 202) advises Sufi aspirants to be on the watch

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15 In contrast, al-Qushayri considers the state of yearning (shauq) to follow love (Arberry 1969, 79).
16 Shaykh Muhammad Zakariya’s writings are used as teaching tools in the Tablighi Jamaat. (Discussion with a murīd who studied with the Tablighi Jamaat, July 5, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.)
for innovations: “When a shaykh tells you to keep this or that rule, you have to see if his advice is in accordance to the Prophet and the Qur’an. And if it is not, you don’t follow it, because it is bid’a.” Later in his book, though, Shaykh Asaf (2004, 250) comments that after an individual gives bay’ah to a shaykh, the murîd should not question the shaykh’s advice. This demonstrates the importance of evaluation prior to dedicating oneself to a shaykh. If a shaykh is found to be practicing bid’a, it is strongly encouraged not to give him bay’ah, but to leave him and search for another that is adhering to Islam. However, once bay’ah is given, second-guessing the shaykh is strongly discouraged.

There are numerous examples in the Qur’an and Islamic tradition which are interpreted by Sufis to support the pursuit of a closer relationship with God through supplementary devotions. The Qur’an (73:2-4, 8) instructs: “Keep vigil the night long save a little – a half thereof, or abate a little thereof or add (a little) thereto – and chant the Qur’an in measure ... and invoke in remembrance the name of thy Lord and devote thyself to Him with an utter devotion.” A hadîth qudîsî (divine saying) states:

My servant does not draw near to Me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and my servant continues to draw near to me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask (something) of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would surely grant him it. (Nawawi no. 38)

The Night Journey of the Prophet Muhammad to the mosque in Jerusalem and his ascension (Miraj) into the presence of God serves as a model for mystical experiences and provides inspiration for the spiritual seeker (Ernst 1997, 48). A well-known hadîth encourages the Muslim: “If My servant comes nearer to Me for a span, I go nearer to him for a cubit; and if he comes nearer to Me for a cubit, I go nearer to him for the span of outstretched arms; and if he comes to Me walking, I go to him running” (Bukhari 9:627).

Although there are examples of extreme asceticism in Islam, such as Mansur Hallaj, excessive levels of asceticism are generally discouraged. As Frager (1997, 17) comments, “One basic Sufi principle is to live in the world and still pursue the highest mystical goals.” The sunna of the Prophet Muhammad provides the quintessential example of living in austerity and devotion to God while still remaining an active part of society and fulfilling familial duties. It is well documented that his meals were small and simple, he often spent long hours at night devoted to prayers, and his household had few
material possessions. He also participated in 40 day and night seclusions (khalwats) on Mount Hira, fasted every other day, and led such a simple and ascetic life that the straw he slept on is recorded as leaving punctures in his skin. However, he also fulfilled his duties as a husband, father, and statesman (Ernst 1997, 20, 99). As a hadith relates, the Prophet Muhammad said, “The worldly comforts are not for me. I am like a traveller who takes a rest under a tree in the shade and then goes on his way” (Tirmidhi).17

The following sections discuss four ascetic practices of the Alami Tariqa. The first, dhikr (remembrance), is a very common exercise among Sufis. By including it in this analysis, the aim is to situate this tariqa’s approach in the literature and add to the contemporary discourse of its practice in Western society. The second practice of khalwat (seclusion) is particular to the Khalwati Tariqa and has played an important role in the development of the Alami Tariqa. The third practice, muḥāṣaba (self-examination), is another important inner ascetic exercise in Sufism. Engaging in self-examination helps the murīds to improve based on everyday events and irshād, the latter of which are lessons coordinated in some way by the shaykh. This section includes discussion of three particular irshād which demonstrate the role of muḥāṣaba in the lives of the murīds. The final practice included in this chapter is the annual commemoration of Ashura. After briefly introducing the historical events and presenting common mourning activities practiced by Muslims, it presents the Alami Tariqa’s unique approach. It also includes a discussion of how the murīds strive to remain aware of Ashura throughout the year. Other common ascetic practices, such as prayer, fasting, meditation, giving alms, and travelling, are not included due to length considerations.

Dhikr (Remembrance)

Oh, you who believe, remember God constantly.
– Qur’an (2:152)

Remembrance (dhikr) is a very common inner ascetic exercise of the Sufis. According to Shaykh Asaf (2004, 187), dhikr is the murīds’ “sword and strength” for moving from the lower spiritual stations to the higher ones, from “spiritual death to spiritual life.” There are various types of remembering, including a conscious effort to be mindful of God, repetition of a litany of divine attributes (a dhikr prescription),

momentary awareness of God which overwhelms the individual, and “remembrance of the soul,” when the individual reaches a state in which the heart beats with continuous remembrance of God (Fadiman and Frager 1997, 16).

Conscious remembrance by repeating dhikr litanies is practiced so that the remembrance may become habitual and enter the heart. This type of dhikr is sometimes performed individually or in a group, silently or vocally, with musical or dance accompaniments, and sometimes in group performances which involve dramatic displays of extraordinary abilities. The different tariqas have various preferred dhikr methods passed down through their spiritual lineages. The Alami Tariqa’s practice of dhikr incorporates the orthodox and unorthodox, spanning from the practice of sober, daily individual dhikrs to the ecstatic dhikr of the Rifa’i tradition.

Dhikr in the Alami Tariqa

Among the Alami murids, dhikr litanies are often recited following the formal prayers. Sometimes, dhikr is recommended to individuals for specific purposes. For instance, as-Salaam (peace) may be recited with the aim of remaining calm in stressful situations. At times, the murids are requested to individually contribute to a goal of 100,000 dhikr repetitions, which are dedicated for a specific purpose, such as the alleviation of a life-threatening illness. In addition, remembrance of God is encouraged every moment. Shaykh Asaf wrote about doing dhikr every time one takes a breath:

If you breathe, can you not say ‘Huuu’? You have to take that in and out breath anyway. So, just make conscious breathing mentioning the name of God. The Name of God is synthesised in ‘Hu.’ ‘Huwallahu alladhi la illaha illa hu.’ That’s why we do dhikr Hu – to remind ourselves that our last breath will be a testimony to the Name of God. (Shaykh Asaf 2004, 119)

In this way, with conscious invocation, remembrance becomes subconscious.

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18 Whether dhikr should be performed silently or vocally has been a matter of debate. The Naqshbandi Tariqa is known for its practice of silent dhikr (Kabbani 2004, 52) compared to the vocalised dhikr of the Halveti-Jerrahi (Ozak 1981, 70).
19 This is known as sama’, and it is a matter of debate as to whether it is permissible in Islam (Gribetz 2008).
20 This is common in the Rifa’i Tariqa.
Communal dhikrs are practiced weekly at the tekiya on Thursday evenings. The participants form a circle (halqa) with men on one half of the circle and women on the other, with a space or cushion separating the halves. This non-segregated approach is an acculturated response to the American setting and differs from the practice in Bosnia. Other hybrid tariqas have made similar concessions, including Shaykh Muzaffer’s Khalwati-Jerrahi Tariqa (Gabbay 1988, 140).

The communal dhikr is traditionally performed by the Alami Tariqa with quiet but audible voices, with each participant attempting to blend with the others and not be louder than the dhikr leader. Many participants move slightly to the rhythm, with some swaying to the right and then to the left, and others simply nodding their heads. When Shaykh Asaf leads the dhikr, he controls the pace and volume, sometimes quickening or slowing it. He also may direct it to be loud, quiet, or full of breath with hardly any sound.

At times, a particular murid has been observed to enter into a state of ecstasy which, much to her later embarrassment, disrupts the otherwise sombre atmosphere of the dhikr circle. When this occurs, her dhikr resounds enthusiastically through the room, and her body shakes with the intensity of the experience. When the shaking subsides, she is left overjoyed with awareness of God (tawhid) and utterly exhausted. Shaykh Asaf has advised that she not be disturbed when these outbursts happen, and they are generally taken calmly by the community members. These extraordinary experiences are considered to be direct gifts from God and insight into His majesty.

The collective dhikr is sometimes performed while standing (kiyam). This is typically reserved for special occasions, such as during the remembrance of Ashura. In the midst of the recitation, the leader often steps silently inside the circle and slowly walks by the participants, as though gently inspecting each from a distance. Many remain oblivious of this since their eyes are closed with concentration. A few, though, bow slightly as he approaches. One time, I bowed and experienced a sense of magnetism as the top of my head was pulled slightly towards him.

21 Thursday is significant because it is said that the Prophet Muhammad experienced the Ascension and Miraj on a Thursday.
22 For a comparative discussion of dhikr performed by different tariqas in Egypt, see Michael Gilsenan (1973) Saint and Sufi in Modern Egypt, Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
23 There has been some observed discomfort and slight envy among the murids concerning her mystical experiences during communal dhikrs.

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Occasionally, the *dhikrs* are performed according to the Rifa‘i tradition with the ceremony of *lavzai dhikr*. These consist of vocalised, standing *dhikrs*, during which the *shaykh* pierces the bodies\(^{24}\) of male\(^{25}\) volunteers with metal daggers (*zarp*) or swords.\(^{26}\) As Biegman (2007, 11) notes, “The practice of piercing is neither a goal in itself nor a means of achieving a goal; it is an expression of the spiritual state the dervishes reach during the ritual.” The participants reportedly experience no pain, and blood rarely flows from the wounds, which are surprisingly small.\(^{27}\) A few studies (Van der Veer 1992, 554; Crapazano 1973, 189) have noted that the *shaykh*’s saliva, which is applied to the wound, is believed to have special healing properties. One possible outcome of these extraordinary feats is direct experiential insight into God’s greatness.

Although the most recent Rifa‘i-style *dhikr* occurred in Waterport in 2007, they were more common in the past, when this community identified itself with the Rifa‘i Tariqa. Likely, in the earlier years, these colourful *dhikrs* helped to attract new *murīds*. Since transitioning into the Alami Tariqa though, the focus has shifted toward

\(^{24}\) Often, it is the cheek, lip, or tongue. Less often, it is the chest, heart, or head.

\(^{25}\) Although women participate in the *dhikr* circle, they are not permitted to volunteer for the *zarp*. This is because the beauty of a woman, particularly her face, is not to be disturbed. As one woman explained, women receive other “zarps,” during their lives, like giving birth. (Personal communication with a *murīd*, November 6, 2008, Waterport, N.Y.)

\(^{26}\) Other feats of the Rifa‘i’s that have been documented include eating poisonous snakes, rolling in fire, and eating burning coals (Trimingham 1971, 37-40).

\(^{27}\) I witnessed this during the annual World Sufi Foundation gathering held in Denmark in 2008.
humanitarian service, and these dhikrs are performed less often. Dramatic, public displays of miracles are not well received amongst all circles of Muslims, and this has been one criticism used against the Rifa’i Tariqa by recent reformist movements, as well as those in the nineteenth century, as discussed by Van der Veer (1992, 547) in his study of the Rifa’i Tariqa in Surat, Pakistan.

A common practice among Sufis related to dhikr is sama’ (inspired gathering). This involves listening to dhikr and sometimes dancing, singing, or listening to music (Knysh 2000, 314-325). It has been noted to bring on intense emotional and spiritual states faster than dhikr alone, but its practice has been fiercely debated (Gribetz 1991). Unlike in some tariqas, sama’ involving music or dancing does not play a large role in the dhikr of the Alami Tariqa. Shaykh Asaf does not discourage this type of sama’ when it is used for spiritual purposes, but he does not advise it as a common practice. He refers to the Psalms of David in which believers are encouraged to make joyous noise to the Lord. Regarding dancing, Shaykh Asaf (2004, 228) offered: “Everyone should dance in joy like Mawlana Jalal ad-Din [Rumi, founder of the Mevlevi Tariqa], but do not make a ritual of it ... It is not bid’a if you are in the state of ecstasy, because you cannot help but dance in front of Allah.”

Comments from the Murids

When the Alami murids were asked what dhikr meant to them, they referred to it as a way of communicating with God, a type of prayer, and a form of meditation. They wrote in their surveys that it involves “letting go of everything but Allah” and that it was a chance to reflect on “who’s in charge.” The murids also noted that dhikr provides a means to build a relationship with God through “concrete ways to call to God by an aspect of Him.” When a special need arises, Amirah commented during the interview that she believed she could remember God’s attributes, and it would make an impact on the situation. Isa relayed that saying dhikr is a way of renewing one’s faith:

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28 There are three categories of sama’: that of the spirit, of the heart, and of one’s lower soul, the latter of which is not allowed by the majority of Sufis (Knysh 2000, 314-325).
29 Hymns (ilahis) are commonly sung in the Balkan Sufi tradition, as Raudvere and Gaši (2009) demonstrate in their study of cultural identity among Bosnian Muslims in Sweden. However, it is likely that many of the Balkan ilahis were simply not taught to the murids in Waterport in Shaykh Asaf’s attempt to prevent the tariqa from being a transplanted cultural movement.
30 Survey responses.
31 Interview with a murid, September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Every *dhikr* has different purposes, different benefits, and different objectives. The Prophet, [blessings and peace of God be upon him], was talking to the Companions, and he was telling them to renew their *îmān*, you know, faith. And how do we do this? Say, *La illaha illallah*. Making *dhikr* of *La illaha illallah* is something that renews our faith and lifts us up.32

Dhikr also serves as a reminder of the individual’s intimate connection to God since every breath and heart beat happens by His decree. The ease of *dhikr* was also mentioned by the *murīds*: “It’s portable and powerful.”33

Taking time during the day to repeat *dhikr* prescriptions was discussed during the interviews as an important way of re-focusing on God. However, a *murīd* noted on the survey that “sometimes it is an exercise, other times it’s more fulfilling.” Amir commented on the danger of not sincerely performing *dhikr*: “A lot of the time, [*dhikr* is] just noise because your *nafs* could be doing *dhikr*. So that’s painful because it says in Qur’an that the worst people, the people most at loss, are those who think they’re gaining benefit from their deeds while they’re not.”34 A few *murīds* spoke of moments when *dhikr* “brings a taste of the presence of God, and so it then becomes a vehicle for something more transcendent.”35 As a well-known *ḥadīth* states, “God has 99 attributes, and he who counts them will enter paradise” (Bukhari 9:489).

According to Shaykh Asaf, the key to successful *dhikr* on the *murīd*’s side, is the intensity of conviction in God’s ability to intervene.36 He stated that the ritual of *dhikr* needs to be accompanied by firm belief in God’s power to change the situation. Additionally, when calling on an attribute of God, the wisdom (*ḥikma*) of God reflected in that attribute should be assimilating into the self, while focusing on the issue in need of attention. Shaykh Asaf explained, based on a Qur’anic analogy, that if *dhikr* remains only on the tongue and does not enter the heart, it will be as beneficial for the *murīd* as it is for a donkey to carry a load of holy books.

During the interviews, Rabia spoke of how she considers *dhikr* to have contributed to the success of Project Life in Russia.37 The first time the project attempted to bring orphans of war from Russia to Waterport for the summer, it received strong interference from an official in the U.S. embassy who attempted to prevent the exchange.

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32 Interview with a *murīd*, September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
33 Survey response.
34 Interview with a *murīd*, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
35 Interview with “Amir,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
36 Talk given by Shaykh Asaf, June 21, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
37 Interview with a *murīd*, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Regardless of backing from a local congressman and 30 letters of support written by the Alami community members, “the immigration officer still said: ‘I don’t care if Congress writes to me, this is my decision, and these kids aren’t going anywhere.’” Faced by this seemingly immovable force, the murid relayed that she stood eight hours in front of a Marine guard and quietly repeated dhikr. She said, “And, we won! But, I will never forget that experience.”

As presented, the practice of dhikr by the Alami Tariqa refers to a variety of exercises. Individual remembrance provides a way to connect to the divine anywhere and anytime. Communal dhikrs range between sober invocations of God’s attributes and ecstatic Rifa’i-style invocations involving extraordinary physical feats. In this way, the Alami Tariqa defies narrow descriptions. This also demonstrates an understanding of the benefits which are found in both approaches, mainly the meditative qualities of the sombre dhikr and the ecstatic dhikr’s ability to inspire, strengthen belief, and invoke excitement about God’s power. However, as Muhammad thoughtfully noted during the interview, “[being a believer is] not about praying and doing dhikr. It’s a whole – you see it in Shaykh Asaf. It’s his whole life. All of his activities are all focused back to the One. They’re all focused back to God.”

Dhikr is just one practice which helps the seeker come closer to God by opening up communication and helping to instil constant awareness of God. The next section discusses a second ascetic practice, the spiritual retreat.

Khalwat (Seclusion)

The spiritual retreat is the ascetic practice from which the Khalwati Tariqa derives its name. Since the Waterport tariqa community originally identified with the Khalwati Tariqa in the 1970s and early 80s, the practice of khalwats was emphasised in its initial years. Although formal khalwats are now less often practiced, they still greatly impact the mindset of the tariqa members and their approach to spiritual devotions.

The Waterport community was known as the Khalwati Tariqa before Shaykh Asaf received permission to establish a separate tariqa branch, which he did in the early 1990s. In many ways, this community espoused the ideals of the Khalwati Sufi order due to its private nature. One murid recalled that on Eid greeting cards in the early years, this

38 Interview with a murid, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
community identified itself as a “secluded dervish order.”39 When elements of the Rifa’i were introduced in the mid-1980s, the murīds were able to identify with either the Khalwati or Rifa’i Tariqas, since Shaykh Asaf is an initiated shaykh of both. With the more recent transition into the Alami Tariqa, traditional elements of both the Khalwati and Rifa’i Tariqas have remained integral to the practices, but less time is dedicated to them now than initially.

Khalwats are retreats during which the Sufi aspirants isolate themselves for the purpose of self-purification. By eliminating the distractions of the outside world, the retreats allow space for spiritual development. This practice is based on Prophet Muhammad’s retreats of 40 days and nights on Mount Hira.40 Other prophets, including Jesus and Moses, also are believed to have practiced similar retreats. Murids in the Khalwati Tariqa are known for participating in very strict seclusions which last 1,000 days, called chille (Shaykh Asaf 2004, 298). Often, this time is spent in a room locked from the inside or at the bottom of a dry well. These intense ascetic practices are aimed at overcoming the nafs and “dying before physical death,” but they attract criticism from scholars and other tariqas due to their extreme nature.

Among the tariqa in Waterport, khalwats refer to a number of different retreats, none of which are as strict as those previously mentioned. In the early years, the murīds used to spend one week, 10 days, or two weeks in seclusion away from home about every three to six months.41 Usually, they went to one of the other Alami tekiyas, such as in Washington, D.C., Delaware, or Quebec, Canada. These retreats may be performed alone or with another murīd. At times, the participants would spend the khalwat in proximity to Shaykh Asaf and benefit from his direct interactions. They would often be given tasks to perform, such as remaining awake all night, or have particular guidelines to follow, including not talking to others. Performing additional prayers, reading the Qur’an, and doing dhikr are encouraged during khalwats. At times, these retreats can be filled with beautiful, mystical experiences. Other times, they may be difficult because the individual is dealing with nafs. Before the tekiyas existed, a murīd relayed that spiritual retreats were carried out by keeping a vigil of silence for 24 hours.42

Over time, the frequency and duration of khalwats have decreased, and the locations have changed. Although sometimes murīds receive permission to spend seven to 10 days of seclusion at a location away from Waterport, more often the retreats last one

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39 Discussion with a murīd, July 10, 2011, Waterport, N.Y.
40 The revelation of the Qur’an began while the Prophet Muhammad was on retreat on Mount Hira.
41 Interview with “Fatima,” January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
42 Interview with a murīd, January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
day and occur at the Waterport tekiya. Shaykh Asaf has encouraged his murīds to participate in weekly, 24-hour retreats at the tekiya or at least remain there overnight.\footnote{The murīds have created a weekly schedule to assure that someone is doing khalwat at the tekiya every night. It is apparent that not every murīd does khalwat every week. When more than one murīd is present at the tekiya, they divide the space, for example, by having one remain upstairs and the other downstairs.} If it is not possible for an individual to be absent from normal activities for weekly khalwats, then going once a month is advised. Additionally, the last 10 days of Ramadan (ī’tikāf) is known as a beneficial time to go on a khalwat.

Most of the murīds interviewed considered khalwats to be very valuable.\footnote{One murīd interviewed who did not consider khalwats to be particularly beneficial relayed that he is able to pursue spiritual activities, such as reading the Qur’an, at home and does not feel the need to spend time away in contemplation. Interview with “Ahmed,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.} Amirah declared during the interview, “Oh, my God, it is so beneficial because of how we get wrapped up in our daily lives.”\footnote{Interview with a murīd, September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.} Several interview responses suggested that participating in a khalwat demonstrates submission to God because it interrupts the normal routine of life. As Rabia said:

> You have to allow space for inner development. This [spiritual] path takes time, and you have to find a way to find that time, and if you get absorbed in dunyā [temporary world], no matter what it is that you’re doing, you lose your relationship with God or at least the close pursuit of it. A khalwat is something that is very honoured on our path for the purpose of maintaining a relationship with Allah.\footnote{Interview with a murīd, January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.}

Similarly, Isa relayed, “I think it’s really a time for you to deal with yourself and then deal with yourself in front of Allah because that’s where you’re going.”\footnote{Interview with a murīd, September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.}

Shaykh Asaf (2004, 297) suggests that one of the best times to go on a khalwat is when life becomes overwhelming and the individual realises that he or she is too involved in material affairs at the expense of his or her spiritual life. Performing khalwats is said to help the murīds with the goal of living in the world without being attached to it. Nuri explained that, “Detachment gives you the possibility of not being controlled by the dunyā [life] inside oneself and outside ... I really love khalwats ... And, I’m really grateful that we’re very contemplative in that way.”\footnote{One murīd suggested that, even if one simply sleeps while on khalwat, it may still be beneficial. He said: “Frankly, most of the time, I’m wiped out. All I do is sleep. But, just going there [to the tekiya], makes all the difference [by helping to revive me for the requirements of the next week].”\footnote{Interview with “Muhammad,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.}
Although weekly *khalwats* are strongly encouraged, if the retreat becomes an escape from responsibilities or a way of gratifying selfish desires, then it loses its spiritual benefit. As Shaykh Asaf (2004, 301) said, “You do not go to *khalwat* to eat and sleep. You are there to be in the constant state of prayer, 24 hours a day. Therefore, *khalwat* is not as attractive as you might think ... It is not *khalwat* to be in isolation in the Hilton hotel with all the benefits of the comforts.” Several *murīds* mentioned that there was a danger of performing *khalwats* for the wrong purpose. Amir^{50} relayed that he stopped practicing these retreats when it became apparent that he was treating them as a “vacation from life.” Another *murīd*, Muhammad, expressed that he would prefer to spend most of his days in seclusion, but, he said:

> It turns out ... to be successful at this pursuit of knowing God, whatever that means, you have to be in the world, but not of the world. You have to be so thoroughly in the world ... And I struggle with that all the time. I still want to go off and be in a cave. You know? But, I realise that’s really just running away. You can’t be doing, you aren’t doing much ... service to God’s creation when you’re sitting in a cave.^{51}

Likewise, Shaykh Asaf (2004, 298-299) suggests that negative influences may encourage retreating from the world to limit your ability to positively impact others. For that reason, performing *khalwat* without the *shaykh*’s knowledge and permission is inadvisable.

*Khalwats* play an important role by providing specific time set aside for development of one’s relationship with God. Although the practice has changed over time, it is still considered a beneficial practice. The next ascetic exercise to be discussed is self-examination (*muḥāsaba*).

**Muhasaba (Self-Examination)**

The first step in turning toward God, according to al-Ghazali (1910), is to know oneself. As the famous *ḥadīth* encourages, “Who knows himself, knows God.” *Muhasaba* was a particularly important concept in the early period of Sufism and continues to provide a method for self-transformation.

The famous anecdote of Rumi meeting his teacher, Shams of Tabriz, tells of how Rumi presented his writings to the *shaykh*, who threw them into the nearby pond without

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^{50} Interview with a *murīd*, September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
^{51} Interview with “Muhammad,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
glancing at them. Shocked, the distinguished scholar lifted his robes and collected his soaked manuscript while Shams laughed at the edge of the pond. This was a powerful lesson for Rumi that required muḥāsaba. Although he was well-versed in both exoteric and esoteric knowledge, he needed to be shown a different perspective of himself and the relevance (or irrelevance) of book knowledge. This incident challenged his perceptions, forced him to examine his nafs, and propelled him into his transformative spiritual journey by which he became world-renowned as a mystic and poet.

In this example, Shams inspired Rumi to examine his attachment to the material world, particularly his manuscripts, by using an īrshād. An īrshād is a highly individualised lesson arranged in some way by the shaykh, and it often helps the murīd reflect on his or her nafs and become aware of attachments or undesirable attributes. Irshads are “guidance, direction, and instruction for inner development,” according to Sufi aspirant and author Muhyiddin Shakoor (1988, 233). At times, these lessons are very direct and to the point, while other times greater reflection and time are needed to understand them.

In the tariqa, self-examination (muḥāsaba) of the nafs is a critical aspect of making spiritual progress. Shaykh Asaf (2004, 120) recommends, “When you identify a strong attachment, examine it: does this attachment do us good or bad if we have it in excess? And then take it in moderation.” He points out that nafs attachments are not necessarily bad in themselves. For example, “Chocolate eating is fine, but eating too much chocolate is not” (2004, 118). Removing the attachment is a successful outcome of muḥāsaba.

Often, strong attachments re-emerge in various forms. A particular īrshād will deal with one layer of an attachment, but other layers become apparent in different situations. The murīd comes to realise that constant self-reflection and struggle (jiḥād al-nafs) is needed to overcome certain attachments because of how deeply rooted they are. As Fatima explained, “On this path, you’ll deal with an issue of yourself on this level and then some years later you find that, all right, you need to go a little deeper on that issue because it’s really not all gone ... We’re layers, upon layers, upon layers.” In addition, cleansing the nafs is an evolving process that builds on new awareness of the self. Deep attachments may be a result of a protective shield which has been erected over decades, a crutch that has served a purpose, an unhealthy habit, an unattainable life goal, or anything else.

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52 Interview with a murīd, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
Removing attachments is often painful, as the nafs struggles to remain in control. Several murīds confirmed on the survey that being in the ṭariqa is difficult because of the element of self-examination, “unless you are a masochist,” as one added. Another wrote, “You confront your own attachment. The golden rule is ‘No God but Allah’ ... and there might be many ‘gods’ you have that you are not aware of ... the path, the shaykh, and the ‘social setting’ (where you are mirrors to each other) might make you aware in a way that is not entirely pleasant.” An additional survey respondent commented that it is uncomfortable “seeing the dark side of yourself, your short-comings and weaknesses, and understanding that you don’t progress [on the spiritual path] without dealing with them.”

Alternatively, a number of murīds acknowledged on the survey that this was one way in which being in the ṭariqa has positively benefited their lives: “I am made aware of my nafs and can therefore work to eliminate them. The fewer distractions, the clearer I feel my path is.” Another wrote, “Being a murīd helps me to ... make positive personal growth working through my nafs, furthering and enriching my relationship with Allah, and discovering who I truly am ... Being a murīd is helping me to become the best I can be and who I’m meant to be.” In the past, the ṭariqa members were known to give a rose to an individual who was going through a difficult time in recognition of his or her struggle. Rabia recalled asking Shaykh Asaf, “What is the role to one murīd to another?” And, he said: ‘Sympathy.’"53 Years later, he reiterated that murīds should support each other and try to help each other out.

Shaykh Asaf (2004, 154) jokes about the “Hammer” Tariqa in which the murīds sit around hitting their heads with hammers instead of doing dhikr. He recommends not joining this ṭariqa, in other words, not becoming overwhelmed by missed opportunities or mistakes such that this becomes the focus of life and deters spiritual progress. Below are three examples of attachments significant for the murīds in Waterport which demonstrate the role of muḥāsaba in Sufism.

**Eating**

Food is an example of an attachment discussed by the murīds during the interviews. One spoke of how he used to love sweets, particularly ice cream, which he could eat “by the gallon.”54 He recalled how Shaykh Asaf literally “fed” his desire by

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53 Interview with a murīd, January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
54 Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
serving him whole pies, dozens of cookies, and ice cream, which he was encouraged to eat immediately. The murīd reflected on this irshād:

Shaykh Asaf has said in the past, if you want something, take one bite because it’s really after the first bite that the thrill is gone. I understand it now. I could have a lot more, but I’m not going to feel very good. And, that’s one of those things. You shoved that aside before. Now, you realise. So, it works.\textsuperscript{55}

The concept behind this type of teaching is to excessively promote the attachment and see if the individual can recognise it and gain control over it. As the murīd said, the shaykh “puts you in that situation to see if you can see yourself and can understand your attachment to that thing.”\textsuperscript{56}

Ideally in this teaching, the individual eventually becomes disillusioned by the promised pleasure of an attachment and becomes more aware that true fulfilment comes only from God. Of course, as pointed out by a murīd, “It’s risky because there’s a chance that [the attachment] won’t burn out, and that you’ll be really totally distracted by it and go down some road that’s just taking you away.”\textsuperscript{57} However, reflecting on one’s actions and interactions with Shaykh Asaf should give an indication of the teaching, particularly when he excessively encourages something. This shows the critical role of self-examination for the murīds.

\textit{Smoking}

Another attachment relevant for the Alami murīds is smoking cigarettes. While smoking may be customary and considered acceptable in many \textit{tariqas}, Shaykh Asaf strongly discourages this behaviour among his murīds.\textsuperscript{58} Smoking is considered an unhealthy and compromising chemical dependency. Shaykh Asaf also states that it interferes with making spiritual progress in this \textit{tariqa}.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite Shaykh Asaf’s strong stance on the issue, several murīds in Waterport continue to smoke. Two of these individuals were working together outside in the summer of 2009, when Shaykh Asaf noticed the tell-tale scent emanating from their

\textsuperscript{55} Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
\textsuperscript{56} Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
\textsuperscript{57} Interview with “Muhammad,” September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
\textsuperscript{58} For example, a few murīds remember being in Turkey with Shaykh Muzaffer and being encouraged to smoke.
\textsuperscript{59} Discourse by Shaykh Asaf, several instances in 2009 and 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
clothing. When confronted, they both admitted to smoking. To the woman, Shaykh Asaf asked that she follow his advice when she returned home and take her remaining cigarettes, crush them outdoors, and never smoke again. He warned that she would curse him during her withdrawal symptoms, but would thank him later.

Turning to the other murīd, Shaykh Asaf stated that God had other plans for him. He commented with a wry smile that even the clarion of the angel of resurrection would not wake him up, and the few others who witnessed this exchange, including me, chuckled warily. The next summer, this murīd experienced a terrifying health event which could have ended his life. Smoking dramatically increased the risk for this affliction and the likelihood of it happening again.

Although several murīds still struggle with their attachment to smoking, a number have been inspired to quit by Shaykh Asaf over the last few years. One’s story is particularly impressive because of its spontaneity. While attending the annual World Sufi Foundation conference in 2010 in Croatia sponsored by the Alami Tariqa, Shaykh Asaf observed a murīd smoking. Later, he addressed the gathering and gave his religious and medical opinion of smoking. Shaykh Asaf recommended to this particular murīd that he quit, to which he agreed wholeheartedly. Shaykh Asaf then enquired when he would have his last cigarette. Without hesitation, the murīd replied that the one he had in the morning was his last and that he would not smoke again. His sincerity was striking and provided an example of “correct behaviour” for the other murīds.

These are examples of Shaykh Asaf publicly addressing an unhealthy attachment. Although it is explicitly directed to one or more individuals, it is a public teaching meant for everyone. The murīds understand that the public discussion is not intended to degrade or single out the individual, but by speaking about it openly, Shaykh Asaf gives others the opportunity to self-evaluate their attachments to the same or another unhealthy habit. Often, Shaykh Asaf is interacting with one murīd, but is intending his talk for others in the room. This becomes clear through reflection on one’s personal attachments and remaining non-judgmental of the others.

Self-Centeredness

A third attachment is the tendency to focus on the self to the detriment of relationships with others. One way this issue is addressed is in family situations. Whether it is through marriage, raising children, caring for elderly parents, or the loss of loved
ones, the *murīds* attempt to learn from these situations, eliminate their attachments, and better themselves.

Childbirth is a lesson, for those who reflect, on accepting God’s will and letting go of control. Selfishness plays no role during childbirth because the expectant mother has no power to change the situation. As Fatima noted, “You just have to give it all up. You know. You just gotta go with this tumultuous earthquake that occurs, and just take whatever Allah has in store for you each time it happens.”⁶⁰ A few women in the ṭarīqa have had miscarriages, a very difficult experience which reinforces the Islamic concepts that God is ultimately in control and that maktoo (fate) governs part of life.

Having a baby and the drastic changes this brings can easily take precedence over spiritual pursuits. Rabia remembered that when she was expecting her first child, Shaykh Asaf gave her a book to read which had nothing to do with motherhood. Instead, it contemplated a deeper existence of life. She recalled:

> So, here I am having this child, reading [the book Shaykh Asaf gave] in the hospital, and trying to figure it all out, and also realising that having a child is not the most important thing. I mean, this was the hint. Whether I know that in my being, I don’t know. But, there’s some realisation that [Shaykh Asaf] was trying to get me to.⁶¹

Rabia understood that Shaykh Asaf was attempting to help her keep everything in perspective and not become overwhelmed and distracted by the change that was about to take place in her life. Although she felt that she did not fully internalise the lesson, she was aware of the general concept.

About 20 years ago, a *murīd* decided to give her youngest of five children to her sister and her husband, who had none. She recalled, “I knew it was the right thing, and I see how beautiful everything is, but that was very, very, very difficult ... That showed me, if nothing else, that if you do what Allah asks, no matter how hard it is, Allah showers you with blessings as a result of it.”⁶² She also acknowledged that Shaykh Asaf helped her heal from the loneliness and sense of loss that immediately followed her decision. As a result of her selflessness, her sister had the chance to experience motherhood.

Another powerful *irshād* on selflessness often involves caring for ageing or sick parents. While it may be considered normal in American society to place elderly parents in care facilities, this is viewed as undignified treatment among the Alami community.

⁶⁰ Interview with a *murīd*, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
⁶¹ Interview with a *murīd*, January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
⁶² Interview with a *murīd*, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Shaykh Asaf usually strongly encourages caring for elderly loved ones at home, if they are in agreement. Not only does this Islamic tradition show respect, but it is considered to be reciprocal kindness for their care and love over the years. As a well-known hadīth relates, paradise lies at the feet of the mother (Tirmidhi no. 1275). At the time of my research, at least six elderly family members had been cared for in Waterport, including several mothers, an aunt, and a godfather. In each case, the murīd had a meaningful experience and matured during this time of hizmet (service).

Fatima cared for both her ailing mother and her husband’s mother, since he worked outside of the local area. During the interview, she recalled that Shaykh Asaf told her many years ago that she needed to learn patience. Chuckling, she advised me, “If you ever hear that, run.” Patience was only one of the lessons she learned during the numerous years she cared for the elderly members of her family, one of whom had Alzheimer’s disease. She also learned about love and service. She struggled with how to empathise without becoming emotionally overwhelmed and then how to let go of loved ones when they died. During this time, she additionally gained a greater awareness of there being nothing to fear in physical death since it is a natural part of life.

Nuri cared for her mother, who also had Alzheimer’s disease. During the interview, she recalled hoping that her mother would move in with her family in Waterport and Shaykh Asaf being supportive of this. During the 10 years of the disease’s progression, for eight of which her mother lived with them, Nuri came to view Alzheimer’s as a beautiful gift, not a “curse.” She explained:

> It’s not something that you would want anyone to have. But, really it was a blessing to my mother because she didn’t have to deal with fear of death. She didn’t have to deal with the issues of ageing, and really, what I saw was that my Mom, as she was dying and closer to her passing, she became distilled. And, really, the essence of who my mother was, was there so clearly. It was so beautiful.

Although it was difficult for Nuri and her immediate family to witness the older woman’s deterioration, it allowed them to see her spirit (rūḥ) and love her in a different way than was previously possible.

Another murīd who cared for her ailing mother and aunt had a different situation than Nuri and Fatima. Since her childhood, she had not seen her mother often following

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63 Interview with a murīd, January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
64 Interview with “Nuri,” September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
65 Interview with “Nuri,” September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
66 Interview with a murīd, January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
her parent’s divorce. When her mom was diagnosed with cancer, she was unsure about offering to care for her. Mostly, she felt inadequate. Although initially reluctant to take on this responsibility, their time together during the six weeks until her mother’s passing was a time of profound healing for both of them. During the interview, she reflected on this challenge:

Shaykh Asaf ordering me to take care of my mother was huge, bigger than marriage, I think, because of the broken relationship I had with her, and how it got healed, but at the expense of her being sick and dying. But, I had no guilt when we buried her, absolutely no guilt about not knowing her or having done absolutely everything that we could ... And, if it had not been for Shaykh Asaf, I would not have had that area of my life healed.  

Following her mother’s death, this *murīd* also cared for her sick aunt in Waterport for three years. Among the many spiritual and emotional benefits, this helped to bridge the broken relationships with family members who had rejected her when she embraced Islam.

In contrast, Amirah was advised not to be the main caretaker for her ailing mother.  

Amirah went through a very challenging period following the deaths of her husband and godmother, during which time her mother was diagnosed with cancer. Attempting to heal from the sudden loss of her husband, sort through her godmother’s affairs, and finish her final courses in college, she approached Shaykh Asaf for advice on how to handle her mother’s illness. She recalled him firmly recommending that she focus on her schoolwork and finish her degree. Although this was initially difficult to understand, Amirah later recognised that Shaykh Asaf’s advice helped her to juggle the responsibilities without losing the opportunity to complete her education. In this case, focusing on personal pursuits was not selfishly motivated because she was ready to quit her studies and devote her time to her mother. Although her mother died before she graduated, Amirah felt extremely thankful that she followed Shaykh Asaf’s recommendation and completed her education. She had not neglected her mother, but she also had not sacrificed her academic opportunity.

Every situation, whether it is instigated by a Sufi *shaykh* or not, provides opportunities for self-examination. This practice provides substantial insight into the self

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67 Interview with “Rabia,” January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
68 Interview with a *murīd*, September 4, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
and the greater purpose of life. The fourth and final ascetic practice to be discussed is the annual remembrance of the martyrs of Karbala.

The Annual Commemoration of Ashura

THE DESERT OF KARBALA

In the land where the winds are ever howling
Towards the sky, I lift my open arms
Above the Furat River, in which less water is flowing
Than in the tears which are moistening my eyes

And when a tear falls on this burning sand
I know the pain of every wounded heart
And all the tears cried for every drop of blood
Still flowing like the river of pure light

And so I feel far above the cruel land
This single tear purifies my life
And lifts it high above this blessed sand

While all the thirsty martyrs are the same
Too well remembers the desert of Karbala
The thirst of Ahlel Bayt and the blood of Hussein.

– Shaykh Asaf

Ashura (literally meaning 10 in Arabic) refers to the 10th day of the month of Muḥarram. It marks the historic conflict in Karbala, in 680 CE, between Imam Hussein, beloved grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and Yazid, son of Mu’awiyah who founded the Umayyad dynasty. Many Sunni Muslims have limited or no knowledge of this decisive event, although the Shi’a typically honour it passionately, some to the extent of performing rituals involving self-flagellation. The Alami Tariqa commemorates Ashura, although in a very different manner than the traditional Shi’a. The Alami community participates in an elaborate fast and mourning period that extends through the first 10 days of Muḥarram. For them, Imam Hussein is the quintessential example of selfless

69 This poem was composed by Shaykh Asaf originally in Croatian. He provided the above translation in January 2011.
70 Muḥarram is the first month in the Muslim calendar. It derives its name from haram (forbidden) because it is forbidden to fight during this month, according to the Islamic tradition.
sacrifice and total submission to God, and the historic events provide teachings on struggling against both the lower self (*nafs*) and the injustices of the world.

Significance of Ashura

Before the Islamic revelation, it was not uncommon to fast on the day known as Ashura. According to *hadith*, many in the Arab tribe of the Quraish fasted on this day prior to the Islamic revelation, and the Prophet Muhammad advised the Muslims to also honour this day by fasting (Bukhari 3:117). Later, when the obligation to fast during Ramadan was prescribed, Ashura decreased in importance.\(^1\) According to Islamic tradition, this particular day honours a number of important events through history (Norris 2006, 170-172). These include Abraham being thrown in the fire which did not harm him after smashing the state idols and declaring belief in one God, Joseph being rescued from the well, Moses leading the Israelites away from Pharaoh, Noah and the ark landing on dry ground, and Jesus ascending to Heaven, among others.

In 680, Yazid succeeded his father Mu’awiyah as the caliph of the Umayyad dynasty (Gulevich 2004, 262).\(^2\) According to historical and traditional accounts, his tyrannical and immoral behaviour increased popular support for Imam Hussein, who was known as a virtuous Muslim. This advanced the stance of the Shi’a, who supported the caliphate coming from the family of the Prophet Muhammad through his son-in-law Ali. The name Shi’a comes from the phrase “Shi’at Ali” or the supporters of Ali. To waylay the situation, Yazid declared that Hussein should give allegiance to him. Having refused to do so, Hussein perceived a threat to his life and left Mecca, where he had intended to perform the *hajj*.

It is not within the scope of this study to relate details of the events leading up to and of Ashura, but a brief overview may be helpful. Although various accounts have been written by respected historians, no version has emerged that overshadows the others (Aghaie 2005, 3). According to Shaykh Asaf, as Imam Hussein’s caravan and supporters headed into the desert from Mecca, they initially totalled tens of thousands. However, the numbers dwindled as a result of hardship and despair until only 72 men remained with the

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\(^1\) It is thought by some that this day coincides with the Hebrew Yom Kippur, “The Day of Atonement” which commemorates Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on the Mount Sinai and the subsequent atonement by the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf in his absence (Hawting 2007, xvi).

\(^2\) The Umayyad dynasty was known for participating in excessive worldly pleasures, and it was particularly during that time that Sufi ascetics emerged renouncing the world and pursuing extreme devotions.
women and children at Karbala. Yazid’s much larger army met them there and cut off the weakened caravan from the nearby Furat (Euphrates) River three days prior to attacking it. The subsequent massacre, which took place on Ashura, was a demonstration of disrespect and cruelty. All male descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, including the infants, were brutally killed, except for one who was ill and overlooked, named Zayn al-Abidin (Aghaie 2007, 116). The surviving women and girls were chained and marched to Damascus.

Commemorations of Ashura

Commemorations are often passionately observed by the Shi’a and to a much lesser degree by Sunni Muslims, but “especially those oriented more toward popular culture and Sufism” (Aghaie 2005, 8). Among the Shi’a, remembering the events and mourning the martyrs is often considered a way of aligning oneself with Imam Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad and, therefore, with God. A common saying promises: “Anyone who cries for Hussein or causes someone to cry for Hussein shall go directly to Paradise” (Aghaie 2007, 119). The events of Ashura have played a central role in shaping the communal identity of the Shi’a, and it has been referred to as the “Ashura Complex” because of how this collective memory influences practically every aspect of life (Pierre, Hutchinson, Abdulrazak 2007, 61). This is demonstrated in a common slogan which expresses: “Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala; every month is Muharram” (Gulevich 2004, 29).

Ashura commemoration rituals have evolved over time, benefiting from the support of various Shi’a rulers. For example, in 963 CE, the Buyid Sultan of southern Iran and Iraq, Mu’izz al-Dawla, “ordered that the markets be closed, that the women should wear coarse woollen hair cloth, and that they should go into the markets with their faces unveiled and their hair dishevelled, beating their faces and wailing over Hussein.” (Aghaie 2007, 118). This description by fourteenth-century historian Ibn Kathir is the earliest reliable account of public mourning rituals.

Although public Shi’a commemorations may vary between countries and between ethnic groups, there are five major recognised rituals (Nakash 1993, 163). These include: 1) memorial services involving narratives of the battle and eulogies (majālis al-ta’ziya),

73 Discourse by Shaykh Asaf, December 15, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
74 This demonstrates that women have traditionally played an important public role in the commemorations. See Aghaie (2005) and Hegland (1998) for more on women’s roles in Ashura.
2) pilgrimages to Hussein’s tomb in Karbala usually on Ashura and the 40th day after his death, 3) public mourning processions which may involve symbolic objects such as a casket (al-mawākib al-Husseiniyya or al-‘azā’iyya), 4) re-enactments of the battle of Karbala (shabīh), and 5) self-flagellation by beating the chest, whipping the back with iron chains, or sometimes piercing the forehead with knives (tatbīr).

Among Sunni Muslims, Ashura commemorations are not as widespread, and they receive less attention than the Shi’a practices. It is traditional for Sunnis to fast on Ashura and either the day preceding or following it to distinguish it from the non-Muslim day of fasting. Also, a vegetarian dish of various grains called `āshūrā’ in remembrance of the final meal of Ahlel Bayt is sometimes prepared. Among lands which were part of the Ottoman Empire have historically commemorated Ashura, as well as Egypt, where devotions to the Prophet Muhammad and Ahlel Bayt are pervasive (Hoffmann-Ladd 1992), and the Indian Subcontinent, where even some Hindus have been known to participate in the commemorations (Chelkowski 2009, 224), in addition to other locations worldwide.

Among Sufi ṭarīqas, Ashura commemorations are particularly common, in part, because the majority of founders of the 12 initial main Sufi orders were direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, and they preserved the traditions in their ṭarīqas.

In Eastern Europe, Sunni Muslims are known to participate in Ashura rituals which bear interesting parallels to Shi’a Islam because of Persian influences. Like many aspects of religion in the Balkans, the commemorations decreased among the general public during Communism, although these traditions were maintained within the Sufi ṭarīqas. For many Sufis in the Balkans the tragic events of Ashura are considered of utmost importance. Throughout the month of Muḥarram, the events surrounding Karbala are retold, special poems are recited, and songs are sung without musical accompaniment in honour of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein and his companions (Norris 1993, 70, 170). The `āshūrā’ dish is commonly cooked by Sufi tekiyas on the day of Ashura and distributed to among the community and poor. The Rifa’i Tariqa of Shaykh Jemali in Prizren, Kosovo, is documented by Biegman (2007, 12-14) as observing an austere time of mourning during the first 10 days of Muḥarram, shunning festive activities and intimate relations and participating in a strict fast that includes refraining from drinking clear water. Describing their position in regards to Shi’a Islam, Shaykh Jemali explained: “We belong to the Sunni school of Islam, but we believe in the same thing as the Shi’a” (Biegman 2007, 14).

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75 It is also called Noah’s meal in remembrance of the final meal on the ark.
The Bektashi Tariqa is traditionally recognised for its Ashura fasting customs across the Balkans, which include forgoing water on the ninth night until the afternoon of the tenth day, when Imam Hussein fell (Norris 1993, 170). The Ashura observance was one of the basic structural elements of the Bektashi movement legalised by Balim Sultan (d. 1516), whose centre of influence was in the Bektashi centre in Dimotiki, Greece (Ćehajic 1986, 166-185). He introduced into Bektashism not only Turkish traditions, but also those of other cultures including Central Asia, Caucasus, Middle East, and the Balkans. Although their influence was prevalent among the Albanians with remaining Bektashi centres in Skopje, Tetovo, Stip, Prizren, and Diakovica, they were less common in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Women retained more freedom and equality within Bektashism than with the rest of the Ottoman society. Some historians including George Jacob have pointed out the influence of Balkan paganism and Christianity on Bektashi concepts. The commemoration of Ashura is contained in the strict adherence to the teachings of the 12 Shi’a Imams, where the strict observance was maintained. The Bektashi veneration of Ali is observed in the verse by Shaykh Shefil Abdul, “Allah, Muhammad, and Ali all are the same secret” (Ćehajic 1986, 162). Bektashi ilahis (hymns) of today still contain the verses such as “We are all qurban to the 12 Imams.”

Redemptive suffering is a repetitive theme in both the Shi’a and Sunni remembrances of Ashura. Geertz (2004, 19) notes that the essence of suffering in religious practices is “not how to avoid suffering, but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of other’s agony something ... sufferable.” Ascetic observances, listening to narratives and eulogies, and the infliction of discomfort or pain during the commemoration of Ashura is often done to help the participants internalise the difficulty experienced by Imam Hussein, his family, and the companions who remained with him to the end. These practices also demonstrate readiness to “be martyred for Hussein” and the desire to be found worthy to enter paradise (Aghaie 2007, 122). In addition, self-flagellation serves as penance for those who abandoned Imam Hussein. As Ayoub (1978, 15) offers in his study of the Shi’a approach to Ashura activities, “all suffering can be in some way redemptive.” According to Hawting (2007, xvi), who studies Ashura in relation to the Jewish Asora, one of the main meanings of its commemoration is to atone for past transgressions.

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76 Personal communication with Shaykh Asaf, March 5, 2012, Washington, D.C.
77 As Chelkowski (2009, 222) notes, a group of warriors who abandoned Imam Hussein’s caravan prior to Karbala blackened their faces and tore at their chests in penance upon hearing of the massacre.
78 During Asora, the Jews traditionally repent for their ancestors who worshipped the golden calf while waiting for Moses to return from Mt. Sinai.
Ashura in North America

Ashura commemorations have been practiced in America since at least the early 1900s, although they did not receive much attention until recent decades because they were often done privately (Howell and Zehr 2010, 63). There are a large number of Shi’a Muslims in Detroit, Michigan, who emigrated from Lebanon, Iraq, India, and Pakistan. This Shi’a community also includes Baba Rexheb’s Albanian Bektashi Tariqa, which is documented observing Ashura by adhering to a selective fast and meeting for daily readings from a sixteenth-century Turkish work translated into Albanian (Trix 1994, 361). Their commemoration culminates in a murīd-only ceremony on Ashura and a communal meal the following Sunday. Other significant Shi’a communities in America are found in Salt Lake City, Idaho; Houston, Texas; Los Angeles, California; Atlanta, Georgia; and New York City. As Schubel (1996) found during his study of the Shi’a at the Ja’ffari Islamic Centre in Thornhill, Ontario, Canada, one way of retaining the Shi’a Muslim identity in North America is by creating sacred space for adapted Ashura commemorations. In this way, they retain symbols central to their ideological identities, and they ascribe Islamic meaning to the Western environment.

In Detroit, Michigan, public observances of Ashura have been held since the 1950s (Howell and Zehr 2010, 64). The commemorations often include evening talks given in various languages, professional recitations of poetry and eulogies, emotional chanting, expressions of grief, and passion plays which re-enact the events at Karbala. Also, symbolic funerals are sometimes part of observances in America, as Nuri observed several years ago while visiting a Shi’a community near Buffalo, N.Y., during their commemoration service.79 Specific buildings which are dedicated to Imam Hussein, called imambargahs or husayniyyahs, are decorated with verses of the Qur’an and lamentations printed on black cloth. Black is a favoured colour during Ashura, and people tend to dress in dark clothing or wear black bands on their heads or arms in remembrance of Ahlel Bayt. Some fast on the 10 days leading up to Karbala or only the 10th day. On day of Ashura, thousands of mourners gather for the closing events and a meal.

Women are often involved as hostesses for the memorial events and may participate in activities, depending on their cultural traditions. For example, the secularised, middle and upper-middle class Iranian women in America are less likely to participate in Ashura events than women from rural areas of Iran (Hegland 2005, 205).

79 Personal communication with “Nuri,” October 25, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
Sometimes, women-only events are held with professions who recite the events surrounding Karbala.\(^{80}\) These usually highlight the females of Ahlel Bayt and their roles, particularly following the defeat at Karbala when they were humiliated and marched to Damascus, where Zaynab, sister of Imam Hussein, gave an eloquent and poignant speech to Yazid.\(^{81}\)

Ritual self-flagellation is not often practiced in North America due to controversies over its practice and its potential for increasing divisions within Islam and misunderstandings about Islam. According to Schubel (1996), even private remembrances at *imambargahs* involving flagellation may draw unwanted attention from the American public. This has inspired reinterpretations of blood-shedding. For example, some East African communities have participated in donating blood to local Red Cross blood banks in honour of Imam Hussein. Schubel (1996) documents the Ja’ffari Centre in Ontario donating more than 163 units of blood on Ashura in 1990.

In custom with traditional Islamic mourning rites, 40 days following the historic massacre, a procession sometimes takes place (Howell and Zehr 2010, 64). Although Shi’a typically gather at Imam Hussein’s tomb in Karbala, Iraq, or at other significant Shi’a places during this time, those unable to travel may gather in the streets of American cities and walk in honour of the martyrs. This has been documented in Dearborn, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and New York City.

The Commemoration of Ashura by the Alami Tariqa\(^{82}\)

The annual commemoration of Ashura in Waterport started in 1985 with the visit by Shaykh Jemali Shehu of the Rifa’i Tariqa in Prizren, Kosovo. At that time, very few of the *murīds* were aware of the events of Ashura. During Shaykh Jemali’s visit, he and Shaykh Asaf introduced righteous struggle (*jiḥād*) as a critical aspect in Islam,\(^{83}\) and the remembrance of Ashura provided an ideal illustration of both the struggle against one’s

\(^{80}\) See Hegland (2005) for a comparison of Shi’a rituals in Iran, Pakistan, and California.


\(^{83}\) Shaykh Asaf considers *jiḥād* to be one of the Five Pillars based on his Islamic education. Symbolically, the *shahāda* is the belief which is held up by the five required actions: 1) *salat* (prayer), 2) *zakat* (monetary tax), 3) *sawm* (fasting), 4) *ḥajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca and standing on Mount Arafat on the last day of the month of *dhu‘l-hijr*), and 5) *jiḥād* (righteous struggle). This differs from the five pillars accepted by the majority of Muslims who consider the *shahāda* an action instead of a belief.
nafs and against injustices in the world. The ritual practices are based on the Balkan traditions of the Rifa’i Tariqa passed down through the silsila (spiritual lineage) to Shaykh Asaf.84

The Alami community, including both the murīds and non-murīds, participate in the commemoration of Ashura by restricting their normal lifestyles and setting time aside to mourn during the first 10 days of Muḥarram, ending with the sunset on Ashura. Small self-sacrifices are meant to create inconveniences that reinforce the importance of the historical events and help the participants relate to the difficulty experienced by Imam Hussein, his family, and companions. Although the recommended restrictions and extra practices are non-obligatory, Shaykh Asaf strongly encourages everyone to participate as fully as possible, and the murīds treat the Ashura observance similar to a required duty. Awareness that many Muslims are uninformed of or choose not to commemorate the events of Ashura intensifies the sense of necessity for those in the Alami Tariqa.

The intention to participate in the remembrance of Ashura is made on the first evening of Muḥarram, which marks a new lunar calendar year. In 2009, the Alami community gathered at the tekiya an hour before sunset to pray the afternoon prayer and prepare for Ashura. Two strips of cloth – one red for Hussein and one green for Hassan, his brother – were hung in the prayer room on the sides of the mihrab (niche which indicates the direction of Mecca), and all of the calligraphies were covered by black cloths except for the name of God. To indicate that the community was in a time of mourning, a black flag was hung outside of the tekiya.

At sunset, Shaykh Asaf commenced the observance of Ashura and instructed us to leave the room and re-enter in pairs, pausing to take a sip of water offered by young men at the entryway. This water symbolised the water of Heaven, and it was the last drink of clear water for the subsequent 10 days. Sipping this water also represented willingness to open our hearts to the pain of the collective memories and to strive to improve ourselves such that we might be able join those who stand strong for justice even in the face of overwhelming injustice. After entering the room, the participants performed the early evening prayer and special dhikr for Ashura.

During this time, the Alami Tariqa takes part in extra observances and ascetic practices. If physically able, it is encouraged to fast during the sunlight hours and additionally abstain from certain drinks and foods after sunset for the 10 days. This includes refraining from drinking clear water in favour of mixing it with juice or tea,

84 The founder of the Rifa’i Tariqa, Shaykh Ahmed ar-Rifa’i, is a descendent of both Hassan and Hussein. The Balkan Khalwati Tariqa also commemorates Ashura, but not to the same extent as the Rifa’i.
which appears to be a common aspect of Balkan commemorations (Norris 2003, 170; Beigman 2007, 12-14). By doing this, the delight of water is lessened in remembrance of the limited water available to Ahlel Bayt and how they suffered when denied access to the Furat (Euphrates) River by Yazid’s army. Also, no animal products are to be eaten, including meat, eggs, or milk. As Fatima mentioned during the interview, fasting and additionally not consuming meat protein in the evenings shows “that you don’t need what you think you need.” 85 Restraining from eating animal products and killing anything, including insects, is upheld because of the great amount of sadness and loss associated with these days. Likewise, anger is to be restrained, and Shaykh Asaf encourages reconciliation during these days. 86

In addition to the limited diet, other comforts are to be limited out of respect for this time of mourning. These include excessive entertainment and intimate relations. Other recommended restrictions include not bathing in such a way that the water would run from head to toe, not cutting nails or hair, and wearing only dark clothing, preferably black. Some of the men additionally choose not to shave during this time. Participating in personal reflection and extra acts of kindness, as well as employing simplicity and asceticism in all aspects of life, is encouraged.

The days of Muḥarram proceed with a certain rhythm which differs from the rest of the year. Some of the murīds reported experiencing this as a very difficult time, while for others it was very peaceful. 87 The mornings usually begin with eating suḥūr, a meal of sustenance traditionally eaten prior to fasting, and the morning prayer, fajr, is said at home. Since Ashura in 2009 occurred during the winter, the days were short and the stretch between sunrise and sunset lasted about nine hours. This was a very brief time compared to the much longer fasting days during the summer months, which extends to nearly 16 hours. This ease was offset, though, by the uncomfortably cold temperatures in the tekiya, which is unheated except by an occasional electric space heater.

When sunset came, there was typically a small gathering of five to seven individuals at the tekiya who ended the fast together and prayed the early evening prayer. A pot-luck meal was occasionally served at the school, but, more often, individuals gathered at each others’ houses for dinner. The evenings were marked by nightly gatherings at the tekiya for the late evening prayer, followed by dhikr and often a talk

87 This was observed during the interviews and casual conversations with murīds.
which usually lasted several hours. Each night, supererogatory *sunna* prayers were performed individually.

During my fieldwork, Shaykh Asaf recounted the daily events in Karbala on the night which they occurred.\(^{88}\) According to the *murīds*, this was the first time that he had discussed the actual events beyond presenting them with the decision of whether to abandon their worldly ties and accompany Imam Hussein into the desert. Although some had read into the historical events of Karbala written by Shi’a sources, they had never heard Shaykh Asaf speak in detail on them until 2009.

Shaykh Asaf presented Ashura not as a historical event, but as though the Waterport community was there with Imam Hussein and watching the tragic events unfold. He relayed it such that those present could practically hear the excitement of the crowd rallying behind Imam Hussein while preparing for the journey as they left Mecca. We could sense the doubts and despair growing as the march continued into the burning desert and it became apparent that success was extremely unlikely. We could hear the taunts from Yazid’s army as they blocked access to the river and celebrated into the late hours while the camp of Ahlel Bayt remained sombre and mindful of God. As the days wore on and the *tariqa* members felt irritable from fasting and many ached from sitting long hours on the floor in the evenings, we were humbled by the much larger sacrifices of Ahlel Bayt. Shaykh Asaf also personalised the discourses by presenting scenarios to the *tariqa* members and asking what we would do in particular situations, such as when Imam Hussein carried his baby boy out into the battlefield in the hope that Yazid would have mercy and supply water, only to have the child pierced by an arrow and die in his arms.

Another feature of the Ashura commemorations since 2009 has been the presence of a shrine for al-Abbas, one of the martyrs, which is brought by a *murīd* and her family visiting from Canada. This *murīd* and her family are direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. Although they are Shi’a, the differences in traditions have not hindered their interactions with the Alami Tariqa. They have participated in *jama‘a* prayers, Ashura commemorations, and other activities in Waterport over the years. This demonstrates the ability of this *tariqa* to lift Islam above doctrinal differences and be inclusive toward Muslims of other ideologies.

The shrine brought to Waterport by this *murīd* and her family has a black, red, and green cloth with embroidered “Muhammad,” “Hassan,” and “Hussein” in Arabic flowing from the wrist of a symbolic silver hand of Fatima. It is placed in an honoured location

\(^{88}\) Shaykh Asaf was present throughout the 10 days, which was unique since his work and other commitments usually demand that some of his days be spent elsewhere.
next to Shaykh Asaf in the muhabbet (discourse) room. A special meal is also usually prepared by this family for the ṭariqa community in honour of al-Abbas.

![Shaykh Asaf and the shrine of al-Abbas in December 2009](image)

Additionally, `āshūrā is usually prepared and served on the seventh evening of Muharram. This symbolises the final meal of Ahlel Bayt, when they scraped together their remaining supplies. It symbolically contains 40 ingredients, which various community members contribute. Each year, it varies in taste as the measurements are not exact. Consisting of mostly dried grains, fruits, and spices, it is a bitter-sweet reminder of the hardships experienced by Ahlel Bayt.

The nightly dhikrs during the commemoration are often very powerful. The pulse envelops the participants as they contribute to the dhikr invocation by pounding their chests with their right hands or fists. In this way, this ṭariqa joins the traditional Shi’a with symbolic self-flagellation. Sometimes, after it is quiet, the dhikr leader takes several steps into the circle and calls out to the martyrs in a voice that seems to reach beyond time and space. A few of the murīds have reportedly had visions of Ahlel Bayt. During the interviews, a murīd shared how she opened her eyes in the midst of one of the evening dhikrs and saw the battlefield of Karbala:
There was the desert, and there was Imam Hussein and the *shahīds* [martyrs]. And, what struck me so deeply was the nobility of them and that, to them, every moment of their existence, they were aware of the reality of Allah, all the time. It was just like the fountain of Qauthar [river in Paradise] coming up inside of them and giving them all that strength and power and resilience and just that focus, and it was so – it was so magnificent.89

While the Alami Tariqa does not participate in re-enactments of the battle, symbolic funerals, or public displays of self-flagellation, it attempts to bring the events of Ashura alive through individual and collective exercises. Fasting, keeping an additional restricted diet, not drinking pure water, and not partaking in excessive entertainment during the 10 days is intended to facilitate a connection between the Alami *murīds* and Ahlel Bayt. Listening as the events are retold and being asked what one would do in various situations is intended to help the participants internalise the historical events and apply the lessons to their lives.

By immersing oneself in this time of mourning and highlighting the pain and loneliness of the physical existence, the teaching that physical death is not the termination of life is reinforced. It is also a time of *muḥāsaba* and examination of the *nafs*. Imam Hussein’s self-sacrifice is interpreted by the Alami Tariqa as a victory of faith over disbelief because, when faced by the ultimate insult of death, Imam Hussein’s conviction in God’s existence caused him to remain adherent to Islam. He did not deny God for the temporary worldly gain offered by Yazid. Imam Hussein gave his life to preserve the ideals of Islam, dying spiritually before his physical death due to his complete submission to God’s will. Rabia, in a rather long statement, addressed the community’s commemoration and its larger meaning:

What I learned on *hājj*, for this particular [Ashura], it says in the Qur’an: ‘Those that rehearse the signs and symbols of Allah do so from the piety of their hearts.’ And this is what we’re doing. All of this is metaphorical. Because we can’t be in Karbala, you know, or haven’t had that experience in our lives. How do we remember? How do we keep that in our memory? How do we honour our ancestors, because if it were not for Hazratī Hussein, we would not be here ... On that basis alone, this is our history, and this is honouring the signs and symbols ... It’s not the real thing that they went through, but we are trying to make ourselves uncomfortable, [for example] by going to *muhabbets* [discourses] in the freezing cold *tekiya*, [while] they were in the heat of the desert. So, we are rehearsing the signs and symbols of [Ashura] together.90

89 Interview with “Fatima,” January 14, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
90 Interview with “Rabia,” January 10, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
There are many lessons that could be taken from commemoration of Ashura. By “rehearsing the signs and symbols,” the members of the Alami Tariqa honour their ancestors in Islam, attempt to develop their moral selves, and come into greater harmony with that which is pleasing to God. Ashura is considered a very strong reminder that worldly well-being is temporary while spiritual well-being is everlasting.

Conclusions

Joining the Alami Tariqa involves a long-term commitment of working on the self to further one’s relationship with God. Although the murīds are part of the Sufi community and have guidance from the shaykh, this is an individual journey. Progress is considered to be dependent upon the sincerity and effort of the individual in addition to God’s mercy. Ascetic practices, including dhikr, khalwats, mubahāsabā, and the annual commemoration of Ashura, are meant to facilitate a spiritual transformation of self-elimination in God’s essence while the murīds remain full participants in society.

When asked on the survey how the murīds balance living an ordinary life with participating in the Sufi path, a majority responded that they cannot distinguish them because they are merged. Several wrote responses similar to the following: “Participation in the Sufi path is living an ordinary life for me. I can’t separate it.” One advised, “First, you don’t view them as separate entities. They can only be one in the same for one to be successful at all.” Another wrote that being in the tariqa informs his or her perspective on life by being aware that work and home responsibilities are not the “be all and end all.” Noting the widespread assumption that ascetic lifestyles are not consistent with modern society, Van der Veer (2009, 201) asks, “Why do we feel the constant need to put asceticism as modernity’s ‘other’...?” The above responses from murīds demonstrates that they have generally harmonised the demands and routines of family and society with the tariqa activities and goal of self-transformation.

Several survey respondents noted, though, that being in the tariqa requires some effort to balance it with life’s other demands. A murīd wrote, “It is about balance. One has responsibilities in this life (dunyā) to complete as part of whole (existence) ... [Being] in the Sufi path is another important piece of the whole of one’s existence. Having a balance of both I believe is what helps one to achieve spiritual growth.” Another stated that being in the tariqa “makes life easier” because the prayers and dhikr are often
enjoyable and having a life dedication has helped to guide decisions regarding employment and personal activities. Approaching it from another angle, one murīd responded unlike the others. This murīd wrote that he or she combines spiritual pursuits with life’s other responsibilities “with difficulty [because] trying to live in the world, but not be of the world is the most difficult undertaking a human can attempt.”

During the interviews, the murīds were asked to explore what it meant to “die before one’s physical death.” Based on my understanding of their responses, this transformation involves accepting God’s will and being aware of the lasting reality such that one is physically and spiritually alive but, at the same time, “dead” to personal attachments, desires, and worldly temptations. Amir pointed out that most of the murīds in this tariqa are only at the beginning steps of this realisation because of being raised in the non-Muslim society. Likewise, most of the other interviewees expressed their limited first-person understanding of it. Isa suggested that when someone has this experience, “your wake-up call comes before your death. You have an understanding of what the dunyā [temporal world] is, and you have an understanding of ... really of how to be a part of this dunyā and how to serve Allah.”

Both Ismail and Ahmed noted that submission to God in this life happens whether it is conscious or not because individuals are ultimately not in charge of their lives. The Sufi aspiration, though, is to submit voluntarily out of respect and loving acknowledgment of God’s superiority. This type of submission means “giving up what you think is best for you,” according to Rabia. Nuri pointed out in the interview that Shaykh Asaf serves as both guide and example in this matter. She said:

My thinking is that you die to yourself, to your ego, to your history, to everything ... You die to the phenomenon of yourself as a human being as it relates to the dunyā. In that way, when you die you become who you really are ... You become, really, I guess what Shaykh Asaf is, a person of God who has totally submitted himself and is free from the trash that we carry around ... You’re in the world, but not of the world.

In addition to Shaykh Asaf, another role model is Imam Hussein because of his complete acceptance of God’s will. Sacrificing himself on the sands of Karbala without compromising with the injustices of the world demonstrated Imam Hussein’s separation

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91 Interview with “Amir,” September 9, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
92 Interview with a murīd, September 8, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
93 Interview with a murīd, September 7, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
94 Interview with a murīd, September 6, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
95 Interview with a murīd, January 20, 2010, Waterport, N.Y.
96 Interview with a murīd, September 14, 2009, Waterport, N.Y.
from material concerns and submission to God. Fatima noted that, as the material world becomes less important, awareness of God’s reality becomes stronger, and physical death is likely not as traumatic. This is because of greater certainty in God’s existence and trust that God will take care of everything.

When asked on the survey how being a murīd had positively impacted their lives, the murīds commented on how it helps them remain on the path of God and be faithful Muslims. They mentioned the opportunities it provides for self-improvement, how it protects them from being absorbed by the material existence, and the insight it brings regarding awareness of God’s existence and a greater purpose of life. One wrote, “Being in this ṭariqa has been invaluable to me in my practice of Islam ... If I wasn’t in ṭariqa, I think I could have gotten stuck in the trap of ‘trying to be a good Muslim,’ and I would have forgotten the objective of trying to build the relationship with Allah, trying to please Allah, etc.” A few responses commented on the value of having a shaykh: “I also feel fortunate to have a source of advice I trust completely whenever I come up against a problem or reach a crossroad in my life.” Another murīd responded to this survey question with a list. He or she considers being in the ṭariqa beneficial because:

“1. The inner daily struggle to examine oneself [and] improve gives satisfaction, the sense of forward movement.

2. The sense of peace, awareness and remembrance of God’s presence, the miracles of each moment, etc., that we were all blind to in the past.

3. The sense of oneness with all creation that keeps growing stronger with the years.

4. Sweetness of relationships when we see God’s presence in each human.

5. Family relationships when we can freely express our love for each other.

6. The actual personal experience that as we contemplate, are aware (dhikr, prayer, moment to moment awareness) of God’s presence that God is also aware of us. Cool beyond cool. [underlining in original]

7. The ever-growing love in our heart for our Creator. (Could go on forever...)”

It was clear from the responses that the murīds could see tangible positive impacts on their lives from being involved in the ṭariqa.

This chapter aimed to provide insight into Sufism as a living tradition that is open to modification, yet which is able to retain its Islamic principles and does not permit
innovations. Ascetic practices, which are grounded in Islamic sources according to the Alami Tariqa, are used to assist with the struggle of becoming submitted to God. Repeating dhikr after the ritual prayers, as part of collective activity, and in every-day situations facilitates awareness of God’s constant presence and provides opportunities to reflect on His attributes. Participating in self-examination (muhāsaba) encourages recognition of attachments and unpleasant qualities, which is critical in the effort to conquer the nafs, improve the self, and align oneself with what is pleasing to God. Another exercise, spiritual retreats (khalwats), are typically performed overnight or for 24 hours at the tekiya. These are encouraged by Shaykh Asaf when life is overwhelming and detrimental to the spiritual life, and they provide time for extra devotions.

The annual commemoration of Ashura facilitates a spiritual transformation in numerous ways. Imam Hussein serves as an example of someone who was able to “die before his physical death” by submitting his will to God and not being tempted by temporary comforts to deny God after the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Also, the recommended restrictions weaken attachments to material needs and comforts. In addition, listening to the historical events and attempting to apply them to one’s life mentally prepares the murīds for challenging situations in which they may be tempted to commit a transgression for temporary worldly gain and encourages reflection and repentance for past transgressions.

By employing ascetic exercises believed to have been passed down from the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the Sufis strive to make progress on the spiritual path and pursue the inner dimensions of Islam. They attempt to avoid giving undue attention to the phenomenal world or pursue its temporary attractions because that is understood as a distraction from God’s larger purpose of creation. However, practicing asceticism does not mean escaping this world or completely renouncing it. It simply means acknowledging its transient nature and not being attached to it. As a Sufi saying relates, “The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame” (Ernst 1997, 23).
CONCLUSION

Sufism in America: Implications for Religion in Modern Times

Regardless of the challenges facing traditional religions in America, an influx over the recent few decades of Eastern religions and individualised spiritualities has provided alternatives to those who may be religiously inclined but dissatisfied with the mainstream options. Among these alternatives, Sufism has been implemented in the U.S. with considerable internal diversity based on differing interpretations of Islam and cultural traditions. Also, through the process of acculturation, it is becoming embraced as “ours” among Sufis in America (Hermansen 2009, 26). This demonstrates a dynamic discourse regarding the roles of religion and spirituality in modern societies and, specifically, the localisation of Sufism in America.

The Implementation of Islamic Sufism by the Alami Tariqa

This study highlights the Alami Tariqa, a Sufi order previously not discussed in academic literature, and its approach to implementing Islamic Sufism in Waterport, N.Y., the main location of its activities. This tariqa was founded in Waterport in the late 1970s by Shaykh Asaf of the Balkans. It has developed a unique membership of mostly American individuals, including almost equal numbers of Caucasian and African Americans, in addition to a few recent European and South Asian immigrants.

Essential for its success in drawing from the local populace was Shaykh Asaf’s ability to release the tariqa from being solely a Balkan movement, allowing it to transcend ethnic and cultural identities. As Geaves (2000, 117) comments, “Sufism, both past and present, is revitalised by the ‘emergence of the charismatic saint’ who brings a renewed focus on spirituality to the tariqa.” Shaykh Asaf’s personable and charismatic personality, and his way of appealing to the universal yearnings of humankind to relate to a higher being and a more-permanent existence, attracted individuals from diverse ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The Sufi tradition of shaykhs visiting different Sufi
centres (ziyāra) assisted the establishment of a traditional Sufi tariqa in Waterport. A number of shaykhs from different tariqas worldwide travelled to the Alami tekiya, particularly in the 1980s, and instructed the murīds concerning practices and inner meaning of Islam, and helped to link this tariqa community to the global network of Sufi tariqas.

This study found that the current Alami murīds joined this tariqa most often because they desired a more meaningful, personal certainty of God and because of apparently unexplainable, transformational experiences in their lives urging them to pursue a spiritual path. The research participants can be divided into three groups based on their common experiences. Approximately one-third of the previously non-Muslim research participants had embraced Islam prior to interacting with either Shaykh Asaf or the Alami Tariqa. In addition to the two reasons already mentioned, a growing sense of disillusionment with the external dedication to Islam often emphasised in mosques and the welcoming atmosphere of the Alami Tariqa were important in their decisions to join the tariqa. Another one-third were mostly looking for a spiritual guide and had experimented with different denominations and alternative religions before coming to this tariqa. The final one-third of research participants were born and raised Muslim, including the second generation murīds and recent Muslim immigrants. Their experiences differed greatly between initially being against Sufism and joining the tariqa as a logical next step. This was possibly influenced by the amount of time they spent outside Waterport and interacting with Muslims of different orientations.

Shaykh Asaf’s approach to Islam was an important factor in attracting local non-Muslims to this tariqa. In Shaykh Asaf’s style of instruction, he highlights the inner dimensions of faith, raising Islam above the basic adherence to external religious rituals. He uses practical experience as instruction tools, including feeding the poor, helping widows and orphans, and other acts of service to help teach humility and gratitude, important qualities of being Muslim that are also common among other ethical and religious teachings. Also, Shaykh Asaf presents the Islamic tradition as an extension of the Abrahamic tradition, which is familiar to most Westerners. Frequently, I observed during fieldwork that he demonstrated points during muhabbets (discourses) by drawing from the Torah, Bible, and world history, in addition to the Qur’an. In this way, he facilitated an understanding of Islam with references which were often well-known by his mostly American audience. He also honoured their religious backgrounds by encouraging their participation in discussions on Judaism, Christianity, and other traditions.
In addition, the mystical experiences and kiramets (miracles) that apparently occurred for many individuals in the ṭariqa, played a critical role in their decisions to join this ṭariqa. These often attracted individuals by providing them with personal insight and conviction of the validity of the Sufi path. These occurrences have continued and often intensified for the murīds, as demonstrated in a privately printed book of collected mystical experiences of the Alami murīds, entitled Murid Tales (Bell 2011). This ṭariqa facilitates an individualised spiritual quest that is firmly stabilised by Islam and guided by a legitimate Sufi shaykh. This focus on personal, religious experiences corresponds well with the modern shift in Western religiosity which favours personal experience rather than a textual approach to religion (Roof 1993; Wolfe 2003).

The Alami Tariqa has acculturated to the American setting and retained its adherence to Islam by striving to uphold the essence of shan’a. It does this while providing opportunities for spiritual advancement to both men and women regardless of ethnic background. Remarkably, this ṭariqa’s previous cultural context was already Western because of its origin in the Balkans, where Islam has been since the Crusades and officially present within the Ottoman Empire following the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Although there is much debate over whether Islam is compatible with Western culture,1 the Sufi approach to Islam in the Balkans has already reconciled many of these apparent discrepancies.

In America, this ṭariqa retained its traditions regarding the Sufi practices and procedures that are passed down through the silsila (spiritual lineage), but adapted its internal culture and some other aspects to reflect the American context. Aware that some of the Sufi cultural norms and practices in the Balkans were not suitable for the American setting, such as the lengthy spiritual retreats and having women participate from a designated area sometimes obscured from view, Shaykh Asaf modified certain elements when he brought the ṭariqa to America. In Hermansen’s (2009, 26) language, he made the ṭariqa “theirs.” Since then, the mostly American participants have also interacted with the elements of Sufism, reinterpreting and integrating them into their lives, thereby creating Sufism that is now “ours,” from the American perspective.

A historical look at this ṭariqa shows that it has undergone both long-term and temporary acculturation. The most dramatic temporary adaptation occurred while Shaykh Asaf resided in Canada before moving to America in the mid-1970s. Those who came to

Shaykh Asaf for guidance during these early years were initially unaware that he subscribed to Islam, or even Sufism. This was largely because he taught in a manner familiar to their universal spiritual backgrounds and did not discuss any formal religious labels. However, after about six months of instruction, they were asked to take the shahāda and were expected to practice the duties required by Islam (fard), including the daily prayers. Since that time, the shahāda has been required of the individuals before joining this tariqa, and Islam has played a prominent role in the tariqa’s activities.

More long-term acculturation is evident in certain adaptations regarding the internal culture of the tariqa. Although the tariqa procedures and ceremonies have not been significantly altered, the murids have enhanced the tariqa community with their familial and local cultural traditions. A few of the murids who are fluent in Arabic and were raised with an Islamic education have contributed by reading the Qur’an at gatherings, teaching Arabic language and tajwīd (Qur’anic recitation) classes, and by explaining and teaching sunna traditions to others. Alternatively, the American-born murids give the tariqa legitimacy in this setting and contribute by both localising Muslim events and Islamising local celebrations. For example, at weddings the brides typically wear conventional American white wedding dresses supplemented by a long-sleeved cover and hijāb, a Muslim twist to Western bridal attire. The food at community “pot-luck” dinners shows the diversity in this tariqa. Regardless of the internal variety of individuals, this tariqa prefers to portray itself as a unified community and not separate into smaller groups. It demonstrates the ability of religion to transcend ethnic and racial differences.

A second enduring adaptation is in regards to the inclusion of women in tariqa activities. Acknowledging the Western cultural norm of women actively participating in public events, Shaykh Asaf has allowed men and women to partake in the tariqa activities in the same room and without a physical divider. However, the men and women are symbolically separated during religious events in an effort to lessen possible distractions and to maintain respect for the women, whose modesty Shaykh Asaf believes may be compromised during activities, such as prayer prostration. Therefore, during prayer, the women are in a row behind the men; during dhikr, they form a circle with the men and place a pillow or space between the gendered half circles; and in the muhabbet (discourse) room they sit separately. This approach differs from the mainstream Balkan Sufi culture, where the women typically participate and watch from balconies or separated areas. In addition, both men and women freely interact with Shaykh Asaf at
religious gatherings, outside the tekiya, and through email and phone communications. Although the tariqa leadership positions are mostly held by men, a few women act in titled positions, including the keeper of the dreams and keeper of the regalia. Women are fully involved in tariqa activities, but tend to be more active in the leadership and development of community programs and activities than the formal tariqa leadership.

Shaykh Asaf does not encourage the women in America to wear hijab outside of Muslim functions. Many murids who were interviewed made clear their understanding, supported by Shaykh Asaf’s statements, that Islam does not espouse a particular dress code other than general modesty. This is interpreted as meaning culturally-appropriate, modest outfits that do not draw unnecessary attention. Therefore, wearing the hijab or any other identifying garment or symbol, such as the kufi for men, outside of Muslim religious buildings is discouraged because of the potential to attract negative reactions. In addition, Shaykh Asaf considers the hijab to be influenced by “tribal” customs and not required in all cultural contexts. However, when the men and women travel to Muslim countries, they are expected to dress according to the local customs.

This approach is likely influenced by the religious discrimination experienced in the Balkans, particularly during Communism and the war in the 1990s, during which wearing religious symbols heightened personal danger. The recent events in Waterport in August 2010 involving non-Muslim teenagers, who harassed the tariqa community by shooting near the tekiya and injuring a murid with an automobile, highlight the religious discrimination in the American context. These events were a continuation of harassment that has occurred since the tekiya was founded. However, these sporadic events are in contrast to the improving acceptance by the local communities because of the interfaith interactions, charity, and interdenominational and humanitarian programs conducted by the tariqa.

At the same time, the tariqa has also undergone a gradual process of Islamisation as Shaykh Asaf encouraged closer adherence to the shaf’a and sunna duties. Following its early and brief shift from resembling a universal spiritual movement to being an Islamic tariqa, Shaykh Asaf has required the practice of the fundamental pillars of faith. Over the years, he gradually instigated changes in the community, according to the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad and the Hanafi madhab. There are many examples of this, including his teaching of the sunna prayers for the Friday jum’a service, the method for sacrificing a qurbân (unblemished sheep), and the procedures and prayers for a Muslim funeral. These activities are performed as close to the sunna as possible, taking
into account the local resources and laws, for example regarding burials. In addition, this community holds more of a traditional, Islamic outlook on preserving women’s dignity by not allowing dating and discouraging men and women from being alone together in an attempt to limit the possibility of intimate relations outside of marriage. This process of Islamisation has been facilitated by individual study of *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* on behalf of the *murīds*.

By participating in the *tariqa* activities and practices, the *murīds* are pursuing a spiritual transformation toward self-annihilation in God’s essence (*fanā*). Their approach involves performing ascetic exercises while remaining active participants in society. The Prophet Muhammad, who fulfilled his duties as a husband, father, and statesman, in addition to being a prophet, is considered an exemplar of this lifestyle. This *tariqa* considers participation in social and family life to be an important aspect of learning to not be attached to material concerns. This is demonstrated by the *tariqa*’s dedication to local and international humanitarian programs.

By participating in society, the *murīds* are surrounded by potential distractions and material gains. To make spiritual progress, they must recognise and internalise that the fulfilment offered by the material world is temporary and that the only lasting satisfaction is contained in the harmonious relationship with God. Reducing one’s attachment to material concerns is facilitated by ascetic practices, four of which were discussed in this study: remembrance (*dhikr*), self-examination (*muhāsaba*), spiritual retreats (*khalwats*), and the annual Ashura commemoration. Additional practices include fasting, meditation (*muraqaba*), and supplementary prayers. These are performed alongside or in addition to life’s other responsibilities.

The changes that have taken place in this *tariqa* since its introduction into America indicate that Islamic Sufism is undergoing a shift towards becoming indigenous to the West. Hermansen (2009) proposes characteristics of three types of global Sufism that is identified as “ours” in the local setting. This includes: 1) eclectic Sufi movements that have only superficial connections to the Muslim homeland of their founding *shaykh*, 2) those headed by *shaykhs* who are Western converts to Islam, and 3) Sufi movements led by charismatic *shaykhs* who immigrated from Muslim lands, which usually become internally divided by ethnic identity and religious orientation between traditional Islam and more perennial beliefs.

In the case of the Alami Tariqa, the shift from “theirs” to “ours” is identifiable as it entered into the third wave of Sufism in America. Spiritual seekers, who were among
the earliest participants in this *tariqa* and who are typically known for changing among the religious paths, have demonstrated long-term dedication to Islamic Sufism. Many have been *murids* for over 30 years, and only a minimal number who lived in Waterport have left the *tariqa*.\(^2\) This *tariqa* has engaged with issues of existence beyond this generation by establishing a structured chain of leadership. This chain descends from the grand *shaykh* (Shaykh Asaf), sub-*shaykhs*, *wakils* (trustees), and others with specific duties. Within the last decade, two American-born participants were ordained as sub-*shaykhs*. This has helped to establish and indigenise the *tariqa* in America in addition to the continued participation of Americans from various walks of life including the highly educated and underprivileged from small towns and inner cities. Also, the shift to “ours” may be observed in the humanitarian projects that make the Alami Tariqa unique from others. These have been inspired by Islamic Sufism and made possible by personal effort from the *murids*. An example is the Project Life orphan rehabilitation program.

Regardless of the differences in ethnicity, education, and religious backgrounds found among the Alami *murids*, Hermansen’s (2009, 37) hypothesis has not been observed in the Alami Tariqa that Islamic Sufism headed by a charismatic, immigrant *shaykh* must either separate over time into Muslim and non-Muslim factions or shift toward a more perennial focus. The Alami Tariqa contrasts to both the Khalwati-Jerrahi and Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa which have undergone changes based on these factors. In addition to the observable emphasis on unity among the Alami *murids* to counteract the natural tendency to form subgroups, a distinction between the Alami and other similar *tariqas* may lie in the small size of this *tariqa* community, since smaller communities are generally easier to unite than large ones. Also, since there are no *murids* with same ethnic background as Shaykh Asaf in Waterport, this reduces the likelihood of one ethnic group claiming superiority and instigating division, although the recent Muslim immigrants would be the second most likely subcategory to do so. Distinctions between the Alami Tariqa and other Islamic *tariqas* led by charismatic *shaykhs* may additionally be found in the way Shaykh Asaf has increased the emphasis on Islam, indicating that it is an essential part of Sufism, and the strong desire among the *murids* not to distance themselves from Shaykh Asaf, which is generally acknowledged would occur if they distanced themselves from Islam in favour of a New Age approach.

Tariqa communities that are founded in new lands by charismatic *shaykhs* often face difficulty retaining their original vitality over time. Werbner (1996, 329) refers to

\(^2\) Exact numbers are vague, but generally only a handful of *murids* in Waterport have officially left this *tariqa* over the years.
this as a recurring process of waxing and waning and finds that it is particularly common among Sufi regional cults. As a tariqa is introduced and becomes established, it inevitably goes through a process of institutionalisation and becomes less charismatic. Over time, it usually becomes limited in its ability to attract new members and is faced by stagnation. This time of “waning” allows other charismatic shaykhs to emerge and other tariqas to experience renewal.

An additional difficulty for Sufi communities established by charismatic shaykhs is the uncertainty following the death of their leaders. Issues of succession, retention of members, and direction for the future are among the matters of great concern for these tariqas, as Trix (1994, 375-376) notes regarding the Albanian Bektashi Tariqa community in Detroit. Also, Webb (1995b, 256) comments on the numerous tensions the Bawa Muhaiyyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia experienced when they had no established leadership following the death of Bawa Muhaiyyaddeen. Issues of concern included the adherence to formal Islam and Islamic cultural practices.

The Alami Tariqa is also faced by the proposition of waxing and waning, of facing future uncertainties and overcoming stagnation. A shift toward institutionalisation can be observed in the establishment of a chain of leadership, allocated roles, and assigned duties. While these are considered positive developments and are intended to provide security for the future, particularly the appointment of sub-shaykhs in the tariqa as likely successors, they demonstrate a shift from charismatic movement to established religion. In addition, there is some evidence of waning in that some of the outlying tekiyas in Eastern North America, such as in Delaware and Toronto, which were active while Shaykh Asaf resided in those areas, were closed. Many murids have since moved to Waterport, consolidating the tariqa in that area, with the exceptions of functioning, but rarely used, tekiyas in Quebec, Canada, and Washington, DC, and murids living across the continent. Changes have also occurred regarding membership, indicating a turn toward institutionalisation and that growth is slowing. The majority of murids who joined recently have been family members, with only three individuals coming from outside the community in contrast to more than 10 adult children of murids in the last seven years.

However, efforts have been made to address these issues, showing that Shaykh Asaf is aware of the cyclical process and is endeavouring to establish a lasting and self-rejuvenating tariqa community. In early 2012, the members of the Alami Tariqa opened a mosque called the Mesjid al-Hussein in the nearby town of Medina, NY. As of February, it was holding regular jum’a services and had begun to connect with both Sunni Muslims
in the Rochester area and the Shi’a community in Buffalo. It was anticipated that more Muslims would start to attend as the word spread of its opening and the weather warmed, making it unnecessary to wear winter clothing inside the unheated building.\(^3\) This new development serves to link the Sufi community to the larger Muslim community (both Sunni and Shi’a) and attract Muslims, some of whom may be inclined toward a devotional path and may eventually join the \textit{tariqa}. It also serves to reinforce the Islamic nature of Sufism for this \textit{tariqa}, making a shift toward perennial beliefs or split based on religion unlikely in the near future, as was presumed by Hermansen (2009, 37). In addition, the \textit{tariqa} is protected from stagnation by the living teachings experienced by the \textit{murids}. These appear to directly interact with the individual, encouraging continuous self-reflection and self-evaluation. With the growth anticipated from opening the new mosque, succession of the \textit{tariqa} hopefully assured by the appointed American-born \textit{shaykhs}, and the continued dynamic nature of the Sufi path, the Alami Tariqa appears to be prepared for a prolonged solid presence in America.

Greater Significance

The existence of the Alami Tariqa in Waterport for nearly 40 years and the findings of this study support the theory that in America, secularisation is part of a recurring process which reinvigorates religion in light of modernity and changes in society, rather than being a linear progression. The present wave of secularisation, which was noticeable beginning in the mid-1900s, demonstrates the cyclical movement by which religious institutions become larger, more diluted, increasingly similar to secular society, and less able to fulfil the spiritual and moral needs of its population. In response, alternative religious movements come forward and act as competition to the established religions by offering what is lacking. Scholars have noted that the development of religions on the fringe of American society is a continuous and inevitable response to societal changes and the limited ability of the established religions to respond to the new trends of religiosity and spiritual needs of a population (Jenkins 2000, 227-8; Partridge 2004a, 45).

The current wave of secularisation in America has been particularly noticeable because of the decline of Protestantism and its societal influences. In the past,\(^3\) Although it is common in the Alami Tariqa to have unheated buildings as a way to combat attachments to comfort, as earlier noted regarding the \textit{tekiya}, the \textit{tariqa} intends to heat the mosque building when it becomes fully functioning.
Protestantism’s elevated moral and influential status was continually reconfirmed, regardless of the presence of alternative religions. However, during the last century, its elite status was shaken when large numbers of mostly young, middle-class white Americans identified the turmoil of World War II, assassination of President Kennedy, Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and Watergate Scandal with a spiritual sickness that the established religions had played a role in cultivating instead of resolving (Porterfield 2002, 10; Roof 1999, 64). Mainstream religious institutions found it difficult to respond in a society which had lost confidence in the traditional social order, while alternative religions and spiritualities found interest among those who were disillusioned and dissatisfied.

In the wake of liberal Protestantism’s hegemonic decline, the weakened self-reinforcing relationship between the established religions and the society has allowed for alternatives to take root and gain support. In an extensive study conducted with individuals in the American Baby Boom generation, born between 1946 and 1964, Roof (1993, 1999) confirmed that spirituality and belief in the “supernatural” has not dissipated. He found, though, that individuals in this particularly large generation were often seeking spiritual fulfillment through alternative and individualistic methods, not mainstream religious establishments. This is indicative of a shift in religiosity toward greater emphasis on self-reflexivity and self-transformation, which has encouraged individual spiritual quests. Supporting Roof’s conclusions, an in-depth social and cultural anthropological study through Vrije University found that “secularisation and sacralisation are co-occurring in a seemingly paradoxical way, undermining institutional religion but at the same time reinforcing experienced religiosity” (Droogers 2010, 97).

It has been argued that the alternative religions are only enjoying temporary growth in the midst of a larger trend toward secularisation. Reasons for this are based on the sheer abundance of alternatives and their oftentimes limited legitimacy, lack of support from societal structures, frequent interchange of members, and often lenient approaches to religious tenets, particularly among those in the New Age movement (Porterfield 2001, 12; Voas and Bruce 2010, 59; Hammer 2001, 31). However, many of these factors do not actually apply to the alternative religions in America, particularly those which are global religions or established traditions in foreign settings.

While Sufism is well-established in many countries of the world, it is relatively new to America, and, although it is becoming established and more well-known over time, it is not part of the mainstream religions. Therefore, both traditional and the newer
manifestations of Sufism may be considered as alternative religious options in this setting. However, traditional Sufism does not fit the claims made above concerning alternative religions in the West. For instance, the Alami Tariqa is a legitimate spiritual order of the Islamic tradition. Verification of authenticity is found in the silsila of Shaykh Asaf, which traces his lineage of spiritual teachers back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Also, this ṭariqa has a strict approach to membership with Shaykh Asaf not accepting individuals as murīds until observing and interacting with them for at least one year. Likewise, this ṭariqa espouses the beliefs and practices of Islam, follows the Hanafi madhhab, and upholds shaf‘a. Although it is not largely supported by American societal structures, it is developing relationships with local faith-based organisations, in addition to its international activities, and finds support through the international network of ṭariqas. Therefore, the argument suggested above that alternative religions are only part of a short-lived trend of sacralisation is unconvincing.

The Alami Tariqa is uniquely suited for contemporary American society due to its two-fold nature. On the one hand, it emphasises personal experience and the individual spiritual path, which is in accordance with contemporary trends in religiosity. On the other, it is connected to Islam. This religious foundation provides the benefits of belonging to an established tradition, including having religious texts, examples to emulate, and moral and ethical guidance. This combination is found among most mystical traditions, including those in Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. However, a number of alternative religions in America, particularly those that resemble NRMs and the New Age, are reinterpretations of religions, novel religions, and individualised spiritualities, and thus do not offer the same opportunity for spiritual development as found within an established religious tradition.

Contemporary Sufi Theory

Since it was common among social scientific literature to discuss Sufism as an aspect of Islam limited to rural societies, the current extensive transnational network of ṭariqas that transcends the socio-economic strata was not anticipated. Moreover, Sufism has demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to the requirements necessary of religious and social movements in contemporary societies. This “modern resurgence of religion is more than simply a residual pre-modern resistance to modernisation” (italics in original)
(Voll 2007, 298). However, this has left social theory at a loss to explain the contemporary expressions of Sufism.

John Voll (2007, 284-298), in his concluding remarks of *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam*, presents three approaches to understanding Sufism in today’s world based on what he considers prevalent themes. First, the established framework that considers Sufism as the “traditional” or “popular” Islam of the rural areas, as opposed to the “modern” Islam of the urban areas, should be restructured to recognise that Sufism is now an important means of expression for new religious trends among the mass populations of both rural and urban settings. Second, since the dichotomy of “local” and “global” Islam is unrepresentative and obsolete in its strictest form, the impacts of both the local and global on Sufi movements should be acknowledged and explored, as Robertson (1995) suggests in his “glocalisation” theory. Third, going beyond the dichotomy of “modern” and “traditional” Islam, some expressions of contemporary Sufism are reflective of a post-modern, post-material society and do not fit within this framework. This includes New Age Sufism, which developed from aspects of contemporary society that differ from those common to the industrialisation and modernisation eras.

These new trends within Sufism highlight its resilience and ability to adjust to changing social and cultural environments and, in some cases, within increasing secularisation. Recognising that religion is an important aspect of contemporary societies has opened up a field for academics that has long been neglected. Several recent edited books, though, have approached this regarding Sufism in the West, particularly *Sufism and the ‘Modern’ in Islam* by van Bruinessen and Howell (2007), *Sufism Today* by Raudvere and Stenberg (2009), and *Sufis in Western Society* by Geaves, Dressler, and Klinkhammer (2009).

**Final Thoughts**

Sufism in America remains an almost untapped opportunity for academic study. Future writings could highlight other Sufi movements and provide up-to-date details on their history, activities, and how they are dealing with issues of long-term existence. Comparative studies could facilitate an understanding of common themes and issues that are important for Sufism today. Insider researchers may be particularly beneficial in this endeavour because of their unique perspective and access to information. It would also be valuable to further study Sufi approaches to living religious lives in modern, Western
societies and how Sufism has contributed to the localisation and acculturation of Islam. In addition, there is a need for greater understanding of the reasons for non-Muslim and Muslim Americans joining Islamic *ṭarīqa*.

The Alami Tariqa provides a time-honoured, spiritual path grounded in Islam, guidance from a trained and approved spiritual teacher, a supportive religious community, and a self-transformative method that is practiced without removing oneself from society. It presents an alternative for individuals familiar with the Abrahamic tradition who are dissatisfied with the established religious institutions and are looking for a way to further a personal relationship with the Divine. It offers a dynamic spiritual path which is highly individualistic and builds on personal effort and experiential learning. This *ṭarīqa* demonstrates the compatibility of Islam with modern, American society.
REFERENCE LIST


Project Life: War Orphan Rehabilitation Project.  


