

Research Article

Authoritarianism in Sufi Spirituality

Sufi Maneviyatında Otoriteriyenizm

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Abstract

Spirituality is one of the most important issues in modern religious life. One can even argue that it has become an alternative to religion, because institutionalized forms of religion can lose their significance in the life of the believer, but one's religiousness or spirituality may remain. Spirituality or religiousness is a quite natural part of our individuality, while the quality of institutionalized spirituality is accidental. Although spirituality tells us something about our authentic self, in its institutionalized form our authentic self is often victimized by hierarchical principles promulgated by spiritual authorities and religious institutions. We can no longer say this is 'my spirituality', because these religious institutions impose their own particular form of spirituality upon us. The purpose of this paper is to show the victimization process that is often imposed upon our authentic self by hierarchical principles, especially as it relates to the institutionalized form of Sufi spirituality.

Keywords: Islam, Spirituality, Sufism, Shaikh, Murid.

Özet

Maneviyat, modern dini hayatın en temel meseleleri arasında yer almaktadır. Dinin kurumsal biçimlerinin bireyin yaşamındaki anlamını yitirebildiği, buna karşın dindarlığın ya da maneviyatın varlığını koruduğu göz önüne alındığında, maneviyatın dine bir alternatif olarak konumlandırıldığı dahi ileri sürülebilir. Maneviyat ya da dindarlık, bireyselliğimizin son derece doğal bir unsuru olarak değerlendirilirken kurumsal maneviyatın niteliği büyük ölçüde tesadüfi bir görünüm arz etmektedir. Maneviyatın özgün benliğe ilişkin ipuçları barındırdığı kabul edilmekle birlikte, kurumsal biçimiyle ele alındığında özgün benliğin, manevi otoriteler ve dini kurumlar tarafından belirlenen hiyerarşik ilkeler aracılığıyla sistematik bir mağduriyet sürecine tabi kılındığı görülmektedir. Dini kurumların kendine özgü maneviyat anlayışını bireyler üzerine dayatması nedeniyle "bu benim maneviyatım" ifadesinin kullanımı giderek olanaksız bir hal almaktadır. Bu çalışmada, söz konusu hiyerarşik ilkelerin özgün benlik üzerinde uyguladığı mağduriyet süreci, kurumsal Sufi maneviyatı bağlamında ele alınmakta ve incelenmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam, Maneviyat, Tasavvuf, Şeyh, Mürit.

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Introduction

To many men and women, one of the most important questions of the day, is the place of spirituality in their modern lives. One might rightfully ask, 'What is the place of spirituality in my life? Why should spirituality matter to us? Does spirituality occupy an important enough place in our individual and corporate life? Is the present crisis in the world today linked to men/women's spiritual deprivation?' It is one of the ironies of the modern age in which we live, that while there are many attacks upon organized religion per se, there is a great support for spirituality. While some people view organized religion as a repository for cold, strict, boring principles and practices, they in turn perceive spirituality as a warm, sweet, free and natural province of human experience. This phenomenon, peculiar in many respects to our time, can be considered as different states of the human condition, and as human life marches on, so the state of humankind spirituality continues.

Because of the increasing significance of spirituality, religion sometimes loses its privileged position as the representative form of a person's whole religious life. This is especially true, when new forms of spirituality usurp more traditional forms of religion. Wulf argues that the emergence of spirituality as a new alternative to religion is a new phenomenon in the religious history of humankind (Wulf, 1997, pp. 5-7). The noun religion, and even the adjective religious, have declined in use in recent years, but the terms spiritual and spirituality have gained in popularity. Spirituality is no longer considered merely a dimension of religion, but has taken on the aspect of a whole religion in and of itself. The reasons behind this irresistible attraction for spirituality lies in its basic qualities, which are considered to be more personal, independent, open, and embracing in nature than organized religion. We could easily say that spirituality is an essential human quality, if it were not for the fact that humans cannot exist without spirituality. However, modern men and women have begun to re-explore the spiritual dimension in their lives, often with a fresh eye on its distinctively human characteristic. Voznesensky, the Soviet poet, eloquently expresses the natural tendency of humans to yearn for spirituality, when he states: "The future computers will theoretically be able to do everything that man is doing, except two things; to be spiritual and to write poetry (cited in Begovic, 1984, p. 19)".

If spirituality is a natural dimension of being human, then just what is spirituality? The answer is simple, because like all religious concepts, there is no one standard definition for spirituality, but rather it might be considered as a matter of taste. So we can say that some people define spirituality according to their taste. The word spirituality comes from the Latin noun *spiritus*, meaning breath, which comes from *spirare*, to blow or breathe. In the Latin translation of the New Testament, the word *spiritualis*, or spiritual person, refers to one whose life is ordered or influenced by the Holy Spirit or by God (Prince, 1983, pp. 127-141). Sometimes the term spirituality is used as an antonym for materiality; a label for our inner life; denoting the interior dimension of our devotion, or sometimes it is used when referring to some form of mysticism. William Stringfellow describes various understandings of spirituality as follows:

"Spirituality may indicate stoic attitudes, occult phenomenon, the practice of so-called mind control, yoga discipline, escapist fantasies, interior journeys, an appreciation of eastern

religions, multifarious pious exercises, superstitious imaginations, intensive journals, dynamic muscle tension, assorted dietary regiments, meditation, jogging cults, monastic rigors, mortification of the flesh, wilderness sojourns, political resistance, contemplation, silence, the efforts of prayer, obedience, generosity, exhibiting stigmata, entering solitude, or, I suppose, among these and many other things, squatting on top of a pillar (Stringfellow, 1984, p. 19).”

As we have just seen different meanings can be given to the term spirituality, but almost everyone agrees that spirituality is something very special and functional in our lives. Because of its vitality, the absence of spirituality in our lives is usually described by the word crisis. Koestler even goes so far as describing the present condition of our time as “the spiritual ice age” (cited in Guinness, 1973, p. 318). Men and women often place too much significance on spirituality, because they think that spirituality metaphorically represents an experience of deification for humanity. In other words, in this experience we express our desire in becoming more human, as well as more divine. Because of our unique understanding of spirituality, whenever we replace the noun form of spirituality, with that of the adjective, it takes on a new and more powerful meaning. In our daily lives we constantly hear the various adjective uses of the term spirituality. The adjective form of spirituality is transformed into new and more powerful forms, especially when it is coupled with contemporary nouns in our literature such as, ‘spiritual dimension,’ ‘spiritual issue,’ ‘spiritual evolution,’ ‘spiritual journey,’ ‘spiritual emptiness,’ ‘spiritual crisis,’ ‘spiritual life,’ ‘spiritual healing,’ ‘spiritual purification,’ ‘spiritual values,’ ‘spiritual nature,’ ‘spiritual discipline,’ ‘spiritual discourse,’ ‘spiritual truth,’ ‘spiritual perspective,’ and so on (Wulf, 1997, p. 6).

By making spirituality an adjective, the intent is to make it express something more personal, something with greater depth, something that belongs entirely to us and is specifically created and developed by us. Because of the unique and individual character of spirituality, we come to identify it with our state of morality, happiness, joy, dreams, as well as with the transcendent-human dimension that accompanies it. Spirituality is the deep ground of individual being, which affects and governs human life.

Although spirituality is essentially a very personal matter, some people believe that it is also a very serious matter, which cannot be left in the hands of ordinary individuals. Thus, certain spiritual authorities seek to be the guardians of spirituality on our behalf. In order to facilitate this process they establish religious institutions, adopt certain religious principles, and produce a ruling spiritual class for the sake of our spiritual guidance and safety. As a result of institutionalization, our spirituality no longer becomes our own individual experience, but rather becomes the property of spiritual institutions, where it is held in safe-keeping by professional spiritual engineers. Many of these spiritual institutions do not simply want to introduce us to their own particular forms of spirituality, but aim to reconstitute our entire spiritual personality. The institutionalization of our spirituality is a process of experiential degeneration, which in turn constitutes a very real threat to our natural state of spirituality, such as, various restrictions on our spiritual freedom, becoming a member of a spiritually closed world-view, coercively encouraging the practice of artificial spiritual

techniques, mandating that we follow the instructions of institutional authorities, losing our zeal and taste for life, and so on.

In this paper I would like to problematize the relationship between authoritarian spiritual leaders, namely shaikhs, and ordinary individuals. By doing so, the intent is to contrast the authoritarianism of shaikhs, on the one hand, with the victimization of ordinary individuals on the other. However, before doing this, two questions must be addressed. The first question we might want to ask is, 'What is our personal motivation for problematizing the Shaikh-murid (disciple) relationship?' Let me answer this question in this way: I was born in the southeast part of Turkey. In this region Sufi shaikhs and religious institutions are not only considered spiritual centers, but are considered as political, social and economic power centers as well. Sufi shaikhs and religious orders have used and abused the issue of spirituality, solely for the purpose and expansion of their power base. In other words, spirituality has become a magnetic tool used for the purpose of acquiring more land, more political influence, greater economic wealth, and greater prestige and powerful social roles. The spiritual position of Sufi shaikhs and religious orders give them an incredible amount of power over large segments of the population. The result is that the shaikh is not so much a spiritual person, as a feudal lord, and the religious order that he belongs to is not so much a spiritual institution, as a feudal castle. In this region of Turkey, feudalism and organized religion have become intertwined with each other. For this reason, I have coined the phrase 'spiritual feudalism,' which attempts to describe this phenomenon. This term not only describes a regional phenomenon for me, but also serves to symbolize the authoritarianism of its spiritual master, as well as the victimization of its ordinary individuals. The second question that I would pose is, 'Why do people choose the institutionalized form of spirituality, as it is represented in Sufism?' Although it is a well-known fact that every spiritually minded Muslim is not a Sufi, Sufism historically represents a major form of Muslim spirituality. In the history of Islam, philosophy and theology have never become institutionalized, while Islamic Law (Shari'a) and Sufism have become institutionalized. Jurists and Sufis have maintained a substantial amount of credibility and authority among the Muslim community, largely through legalistic and Sufi institutions, such as madrasa and tariqa. While Jurists generally control the practical aspects of a Muslim's daily life, the Sufi shaikhs control the spiritual aspects.

Can we critically problematize the allegedly spiritual lives of Sufis? According to Sufis, their spiritual experience is quite internalized and mysterious, therefore, it is very difficult for them to understand and conceptualize their own spiritual experience. They maintain that they should not be asked or questioned about the validity of their own spiritual experience. Al-Ghazali, a great Muslim scholar, expresses this idea by quoting the following Sufi poem:

What I experience, I shall not try to describe.

Call me happy, but ask me no more.

There has happened to me what has happened, I shall not speak,

Think of the good and ask me not for account of it. (cited in Shafaq, 1954-55, p. 47)

One could argue that the idea expressed in this Sufi poem means that there are some matters, like a spiritual-mystical experience, that we can know about in an intuitive or experiential sense, but that they are beyond our powers of rational-intellectual thought to understand and explain. It seems to me that the spiritual side of Sufism means more than this. In my view, they want to close every intellectual door that would naturally open their religious system up to criticism and questioning, which they perceive as a threat to their spiritual power, position, religious institution, and its principles. In other words, they tell outsiders to shut their mouths, close their eyes, and to follow blindly their instructions. They accuse anyone who would criticize or question their spiritual authority of being shallow-minded and ignorant. They state that such a person does not fully understand the mysteries of spiritual life, and that they are to be considered an anti-spiritual aggressor. If we are not freely allowed to criticize or question a particular form of spirituality, or the accounts given to us about the Sufis spiritual experience, then how can we place any value on their spirituality? The present author does not claim to be a very spiritual person, nor an anti-spiritual person, and although I think spirituality is something quite important, I doubt whether spiritual institutions, like Sufi religious orders, are safe spiritual heaven for many individuals. Although such thinking might be construed as skepticism, I think that every individual should have the right to freely criticize and problematize every aspect of spirituality, and no form of spirituality should have a privileged position that is above reproach or critical analysis or reflection, including Sufism.

There are three things that constitute an organized spiritual experience in Sufism: the Shaikh (the spiritual master), the murid (the disciple), and the tariqa (the religious order). However, everything generally revolves around the Shaikh in Sufi orders. Without him, there is no Sufism. ‘Abd al-Qadir al-Gilani (d.1166), the founder of the Qadri order, states that, “The order is the Shaikh and the Shaikh is the order (cited in Danner, 1976, p. 29)”. Although there is no divine authority behind the spirituality of Sufi shaikhs, they make themselves out to be spiritual masters, or rather their followers do. In other words, their spiritual authority is a self-stylized form of mastership. Their personalities are mythological constructions, because they present themselves as people who have been enlightened by God, who fully practice religious ritual, and who understand the deep mysteries of religious and spiritual life (Burkle, 1982, p. 35).

As a result of such mythological thinking, to become a follower of any Sufi shaikh is not so much a matter of choice, as a mandatory duty, because living without the guidance of the shaikh is tantamount to living with Satan. The following Sufi principle extrapolates the authority of Sufi shaikhs in more definite terms: “One who has not spiritual guide (shaikh), has the devil (Satan) for a spiritual guide (Renard, 1996, p. 253)”. The antithesis of God in Islam is Satan, and every Muslim is called upon to escape the snares and temptations of Satan and follow the way of God. Sufis being well aware of this dilemma, cleverly devised the above principle, so that by doing so the Sufi shaikhs place themselves on the side of God, and whoever does not follow their spiritual instructions, finds

themselves squarely on the side of Satan. In other words, they present the question of obedience to their spiritual authority, as a question of either following God or following Satan.

Although shaikhs are represented as spiritual masters, symbols of spiritual perfection, persons who hold the keys to all spiritual mysteries, being the closest friends to God, and so forth; by contrast, murids are portrayed in negative and derogatory terms. If anyone becomes a disciple in a Sufi order, he/she is considered a child, immature and ignorant, one who does not know the spiritual way of the order. He/she is looked upon as a foreigner in the order, much as a barbarian is looked upon from one who lives in a civilized community. So a murid is perceived as one who needs to be taught, educated, disciplined, and properly instructed by the shaikh, so that he/she may obtain a higher spiritual level. The essential attitude in the Sufi experience is that the murid must absolutely surrender and be obedient to the power and authority of the shaikh. The chief virtue on the part of the murid is his/her willingness to surrender his/her will to the will of another, whilst his/her capital sin would be to live a life of disobedience to the will of his/her spiritual master (the shaikh). Junayd al-Baghdadi (d.910), a prominent Sufi, describes the authoritarian relationship that exists between the Shaikh and murid by saying that the murid must be in the hands of his/her shaikh as “a dead body is in the hands of its washer” (*perinde accadaver*) (Rahman, 1979, p. 137). Because ordinary individuals are called upon to give absolute obedience to shaikhs, spirituality is no longer a free individual experience, but rather a militaristic spiritual exercise. Under this spiritual militarist regime, the murid must obey unconditionally what the shaikh orders him/her to do, and try to avoid what he forbids him to do, otherwise, he/she will fail (Ibn ‘Ata Allah, 1996, p. 94). Because of the militaristic character of Sufi spirituality, the relationship between shaikh and murid is not an I/Thou relationship, but rather a commander/soldier relationship.

The murid not only has to accept the authority of his/her shaikh, but he/she has to internalize it. There is no place for the concept of privacy in his/her spiritual walk, because every aspect of his/her life is under the control of his/her master. There are some principles that aim to hide and justify this invasion of privacy into the life of the follower, by his/her Sufi master. *Himmah* and *rabita* are two of the main requirements of Sufi spirituality. The principle of *Himmah* requires that a murid must ask with all his/her heart for the help of his/her master. The term *rabita* means that the murid must spiritually connect himself/herself with his/her master until the master becomes his constant companion. Ibn ‘Ata Allah, one of the key figures in the Shadhili order, goes even further by saying that a murid must remember his/her master under every circumstance, even in his/her dreams (Ibn ‘Ata Allah, 1996, p. 100).

In Sufism, the concept of annihilation (*fana*) is essential. The annihilation of the flesh when approaching God (*fana fi’llah*) and the annihilation of self-love when embracing God’s love (*fana fi’isk*), represents the most perfect spiritual level. Sufi orders stipulate two more forms of annihilation for a disciple: the annihilation of one’s self before one’s master (*fan fi’shaikh*), and the annihilation of worldly pleasures when entering the religious order (*fana fi’tariqa*). These two forms

of annihilation aim at ensuring the absolute and constant dependency of religious followers to their spiritual masters, and the institutions that they build.

The mind of the average murid is full of many mythological stories that center around the personality of the shaikh. Many charismatic events are orchestrated in the Sufi order to make the master appear different, mysterious, more privileged, and more holy than the average believer. Charismatic phenomena, or *karamat*, are accepted by Sufi disciples as signs, which prove their master's close relationship with God. Most murid never questions the veracity of these stories, for to do so would be anathema. The average murid has difficulty believing that his/her master is a normal human being like himself/herself; instead he/she prefers to see his/her master as a divine or semi-divine person. He/she views his/her master's life in the same light as that of God. The mythological transformation of the personality of the master makes the murid feel that he/she is not dependent on an ordinary human being, but rather a spiritually divine master.

Sufism creates a spiritual illusion centered in the authoritarianism of the master and the religious institution, which he/she belongs. This spiritual illusion is largely based on pious clichés, such as the love of God, the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), the perfect man (*insan-i kamil*), the development of one's self, from the quilt-ridden self, to the tranquilized self, and spiritual peace. These are valid and very important concepts, but they lose their significance because they become trivialized through over use, but still help to empower the status of the master. If a murid wants to love God, he/she first has to love his/her shaikh, and he/she must not forget to invoke God in any other way, than that which his/her master has taught him/her. Thus, the ideal or perfect man is considered to be the master, and the spiritual development of the disciple must be controlled by him, from beginning to end. In the light of my own limited observation, the Sufi spiritual experience is illusory, but a very strong illusion, which still has the power to govern people's lives.

It is obvious that Sufism expects people to be followers of a shaikh, in the same way that they are called to be servants of God. If we ask, 'Who is God?'; then the reply may be for some, Sufism, which under-girds the shaikh/murid relationship. Sufism does not openly state, but it implies that the shaikh is on a level with deity. One of the results of the deification of the shaikh is that the murid will never be fully free or independent of him/her, even if he/she obtains a high level of spiritual perfection, in such a case the shaikh would still remain his/her spiritual savior and guide. The spiritual geography of individuals quickly becomes the spiritual colony of the shaikh, which is the fruit of corrupted Sufi principles and religious organizations. It is important to argue that Sufi religious orders are successful when they let the shaikh have a place in our spiritual geography, but once the shaikh occupies this territory he often fails to liberate it. The liberation of spiritual life from the authoritarian shaikhs is perhaps, if not the most important problem, certainly it is one of the central problems facing the spirituality of Muslims today.

The authoritarianism so closely associated with spiritual masters is the result of an authoritarian understanding of spirituality, because peoples' understanding of spirituality derives from the instructions they receive from Sufism. They do not perceive spirituality as a free and individualistic

way of looking at life from a totally new perspective, one that enriches our understanding of life, and makes us realize our greatest potential.

The shaikh is considered to be the creator of spiritual experience in Sufism, while individual followers become victims of the religious system. The would-be disciple assumes a totally receptive role, their religious experience is not creative or spontaneous, but imitative and conformist. They begin to lose their ability to make independent decisions concerning everyday life issues, for instance, in such matters as who they will marry or having a political choice. Shaikhs, as masters, are at the center of religious life, while individual followers are consigned to the periphery. They feel happy and comfortable, because they believe that their spiritual masters, and the institutions which they represent, will provide them with all of the answers to their spiritual questions, and thus satisfy their spiritual hunger. But they pay a heavy price for this pseudo-happiness and comfort. For they sacrifice their spiritual freedom for the sake of their masters.

The following question is always central in my mind: 'How can we be spiritually independent without being dependent on spiritual institutions and their masters, such as Sufi religious orders and their masters?' Frankly, I do not know how people can keep their spiritual independence, because it is up to each individual to find his or her way of doing it. But, there is a vital reason for maintaining one's spiritual independence. They must remain spiritually independent if they are to remain spiritually free. Whatever has been said about spirituality, has been said by man. In other words, it is a human construction, including Sufism. The human individual must not relinquish his or her spirituality to any institution, but rather he or she must betray all institutions and authority for the sake of his or her spiritual freedom. It is important to bear in mind however, that spirituality is not a fixed state, but rather a dynamic and creative phenomenon. In order to be spiritually creative and spontaneous, it is often necessary to reconstruct or deconstruct past spiritual pathways. For example, a careful conceptual critique of all spiritual concepts is inevitable before a creative spiritual vision can be achieved. Reconstruction and deconstruction must be perceived as a real spiritual activity, rather than blindly acquiescing to spiritual institutions. One could object that this idea does not bring us anywhere, because the road seems to go nowhere. Of course, the constant spiritual reconstruction and deconstruction process does not lead us to the doorstep of spiritual institutions, such as Sufi tariqas, nor does it make us follow in the footsteps of the Sufi masters. But it will lead us to our own authentic spiritual self, who is creatively building our own form of spirituality, and striving against spiritual authoritarianism and conformism. The authentic spiritual self is no longer a victim of spiritual institutions and authorities, but he/she is the creator of his/her own spirituality. This creative type does not receive any instructions from anyone, but freely builds his or her life without any boundaries and authorities, because he or she believes that the greatest spiritual sin is an unlived life.

Ethics Committee Approval

This study is a theoretical work and does not require ethics committee approval.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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