Belief in the existence and powers of ‘saints’ or ‘friend of God’ (wall, pl. awliya) is pervasive throughout the Muslim world. Such individuals are often associated with Sufism, or Islamic mysticism, though the notion of human perfection probably developed first among the Shi’a.

According to some branches of the Shi’a, the imams inherited from the Prophet a spark of divine light granting them a perfection and sinlessness denied to ordinary human beings. The perfection of the saints in Sunni Islam is also a divine grace, and is often also associated with putative inheritance from the Prophet, though the latter’s powers do not derive from the arduous disciplines of self-denial and devotion that are peculiar to the Sufi way. A true Sufi sheikh, or spiritual master, should be a friend of God, one who by virtue of his closeness to God has no need, by the light of God what no ordinary person can see, and who is therefore qualified to give each disciple direction and instruction that befits him or her. Nonetheless, not all those who are recognized as saints are follow- ers of the Sufi path, and not all those who are recognized as sheiks are broadly recognized as saints.

Since there is no body in Islam authorized to canonize saints, as there is in Catholicism, the process by which sainthood is recognized is entirely informal and necessarily a matter of contention. Typically, disciples regard their masters not only as saints, but usually as the greatest of all saints, the quubb (axis) or ghosh (helix). Nonetheless, the problem of unqualified individuals being granted a certificate to function as Sufi sheikhs has been broadly recog- nized by Sufis themselves. So who is a saint, and how is he or she recognized?

The qualities typically deemed mandatory for saints include piety, observance of the laws, and performance of multiple charitable deeds. For the experts on Muslim sainthood also tell us that the process by which sainthood is recognized is primarily informal and necessarily a matter of contention. Typically, disciples regard their masters not only as saints, but usually as the greatest of all saints, the quubb (axis) or ghosh (helix). Nonetheless, the problem of unquali- fied individuals being granted a certificate to function as Sufi sheikhs has been broadly recog- nized by Sufis themselves. So who is a saint, and how is he or she recognized?

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