The Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia

Of great importance for the diffusion of the Naqshbandi order was Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) from India, who, at the turn of the first millennium (Hijra) became one of its great innovators, thence gaining the epithet (re-newer). He is, as so many other leading Naqshbandi figures well-known both for his great wisdom and powerful community leader. Another prominent Naqshbandi sheikh and re-newer was Mawlana Khalid (d. 1827), who belonged to a Kurdish tribe in what is now Syria. He is renowned as a great religious personality and powerful community leader. Outiders trying to understand the role of the Naqshbandi order in today’s society often mistake its members’ involvement in worldly affairs (as economic entrepreneurs, state officials, or political activists) for the order’s religious involvement, as if religious involvement was nothing but a pretext or cover for their economic or political power interests. However, this picture is over-simplified. A characteristic feature of the Naqshbandi order is the depth of a double responsibility: towards this world and the other world. This position can be as valid today as it was hundreds of years ago and constitutes an important key to the remarkable perseverance and integrity of the movement.

The Naqshbandi order could not have preserved its core identity so persistently, had it not been for a good share of flexibility. Its capacity to adjust to changing social conditions is just as remarkable as its endurance. The openness towards change has been especially observable during the last century and especially the last couple of decades, when representatives for the Naqshbandi tankat have been involved in a range of high technology enterprises and institutions of higher education and the latest innovations in media technology. Studying the Naqshbandi raises intriguing questions not only about how change and continuity are balanced against each other, but also how serious concerns for this world and the next are combined against the challenges from an increasingly secularized society.

Preserving tradition

In today’s world, where social relationships are highly fluid, it is remarkable to notice the existence of a viable religious movement with roots several hundred years back in history. It is only by reflecting over the immense transformations taking place within economic relationships, political structures, settlement patterns, communications, science, technology and even family relationships over the last 100 to 150 years, that one can truly appreciate the extraordinary fact that a Sufi order like the Naqshbandiya has been able to preserve its traditions since the 13th century. This highlights the need for a closer look at the role of the Naqshbandi order’s eponym, Sheikh Ahmad Naqshband (d. 1389), in the capacity of a wandering mendicant, for more than 40 years travelled around to Kirkuk, Mosul, Aleppo, Jerusalem and the Hizaq, and how he finally settled in the Naqshbandi order. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it became evident that a widespread, self-sustaining order was formed in these regions, the Naqshbandi order gained a foothold on the three main regions of the Sunni Muslim world: the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

Dhikr (zikr) – the repetitive invocation of the name of Allah – is widely practiced today in Sufi. The zikr air to as new as the Naqshbandi order and constitutes an important key to the remarkable perseverance and integrity of the movement.

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Background and content

The articles on which the book, The Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia: Changes and Continuity is based are papers read at a conference entitled ‘Patterns of Transformation among the Naqshbandi in Middle East and Central Asia’ held at the Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul from 9-11 June 1997. The conference was part of a two-year programme of activities at the Institute focusing on ‘Islam’s culture’. The aim of the conference was to address problems of recent change among the Naqshbandi in the new political and social tendencies in the region. Over the long history of this institution, the aim was to encourage analyses in a longue durée perspective. In light of that objective, studies focusing on Central Asia gained particular significance, since these areas are the original homeland of the Naqshbandi. But it was crucial to focus on Central Asia for yet another reason, which concerns the fact that its peoples have only very recently come out from a 70-year-long communist dictatorship, in which religion was severely suppressed. Stemming from this fact are many questions related to what will happen to Islam in general, and the Naqshbandi in particular, as conditions in this part of the world have the opportunity to normalize. The book opens with a chapter by Hamid Al格尔, where attention is drawn to how ‘global’ people, living many generations beyond the time of their ancestors, in fact lived. This highlights the need for an analysis of how Sheikh Nizam of Khashg (d. 1706), in the capacity of a wandering mendicant, for more than 40 years travelled around to Kirkuk, Mosul, Aleppo, Jerusalem and the Hizaq, and how he finally settled in the Naqshbandi order. In the 17th and 18th centuries, it became evident that a widespread, self-sustaining order was formed in these regions, the Naqshbandi order gained a foothold on the three main regions of the Sunni Muslim world: the Ottoman Empire, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent.

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