Mawīlds, traditional festivals in honour of saints, are among the most popular, but also the most controversial in Islam. Millions of people – even half of all the Muslims in Egypt according to an official estimate – participate in these festivals. In the public sphere, however, Islamists and conservative men of religion often find themselves side by side with many secularists, both vehemently opposing what they consider a shameful deviation from proper Islamic and/or modern culture.

Mawīlds are celebrated annually at saints’ shrines. People often travel to these festivals from long distances in order to pay respect to the saint, find a solution to a problem or for a cure in an illness, meditate, meet friends and relatives, and just have fun. Islamic mawīlds – a number of Christian and Jewish mawīlds exist as well – are closely connected to Sufism. Sufi dhikr (meditation) and visits to the shrine of the respective saint, often a Sufi shaykh, are central to the festivities. Yet it is insufficient to describe mawīlds entirely in terms of mysticism and religious practice. These religious aspects are mixed with more profane ones: a mawīd is also an important social occasion that often accompanies a great variety of commercial entertainment. On the ‘great night’, the final evening of a mawīd, people crowd the area surrounding the shrine with Suﬁ dhikr and merchants offering snacks and sweets, target shooting and circus performances.

The sacred and profane elements of the festival are mixed in a seemingly unorganised fashion. This impression is shared by the participants. The colloquial for mawīd is a common metaphor for chaos. This mixture of apparently incompatible elements is an essential feature of the mawīd and one of the main reasons why many people find these festivals highly irritating.

Antidote for modernity

Since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the veneration of saints has become a major target of modernist and reformist criticism concerned with traditional Islamic practices. The reformists, in their response to European claims of cultural superiority as opposed to the alleged backwardness, fatalism and superstitions of the Muslims, chose to dissociate true, authentic Islamic festivaling from the popular religious traditions of the Muslims, the latter being held responsible for the refiguration of contemporary Muslim societies.

Mawīlds, perhaps the most visible expressions of saint veneration, became a target of religious modernists – and still are known to students of modern Islam. However, they fail to give a complete picture of what the festival actually makes mawīd so offensive to some people. There is a third, seldom outspoken, but nevertheless very central criterion for the perception of the mawīd festival: namely, the question concerning the aesthetic quality of modern Islamic culture. The importance of this question is revealed in the following.

The mawīd of al-Sha’rāwī

After the death, in June 1998, of the enormously popular television preacher Muhammad Mutawalli al-Sha’rāwī, a cult similar to the traditional cult of saints began to develop around him. His picture could be seen almost everywhere. Prayerers related to him and books written by or about him flooded the newspaper stands, and reruns of his sermons were shown on television. The funeral of al-Sha’rāwī was a mass event, turning a popular cult developed around his tomb in his native town Daqāqis in the Nile Delta. Consequently, the Sha’rāwī’s second son, Abū al-Rahmān organized a mawīd to commemorate, the first anniversary of his father’s death.

This mawīd took place in mid-June 1999 and the final evening was celebrated on the 17th of that month. The festivities centred on the shrine’s ‘at this time still under construction – located next to the Islamic Centre of al-Sha’rāwī, which is now operated by the Sha’rāwī’s son. A continuous stream of visitors passed by the shrine, paying their respects to the Sha’rāwī and seeking his blessing (bokhā). At the Centre, an official ceremony took place which was set to satisfy reformist standards: addresses were read, al-Sha’rāwī’s religious heritage was discussed, local poets recited panegyrics on the Sha’rāwī, and awards were granted for young authors from the region. This official programme was followed by the recitation of the Qurān.

On the street in front of the Centre, the more informal and significantly bigger part of the festival took place. In a large tent, dhikr was conducted. Along the street, chippeas, snacks, sweets, amulets, funny hats and other inexpensive souvenirs were being sold. Steps away, target shooting continued, swings boats and money-games had been set up next to a stage where a munist, accompanied by a band, was chanted religious hymns. Belly-dancing as well as the consumption of alcohol and hashish, which are among the more controversial practices of mawīd, were absent from the festival in Daqāqis. The atmosphere was one of a communal gathering with neighbours, families, Sulīf and followers of the Sha’rāwī coming together especially for an entertainment programme not only for consolidating existing communal ties but also for creating new ones: facilitation by the Sha’rāwī of entertainment during the festivities, young men and women used the occasion to see and be seen.

‘Who will stop this mockery?’

The mawīd of al-Sha’rāwī caused a storm of protest in the religious and secularist press. But the sacralization of al-Sha’rāwī was greatly encouraged by the pro-government conservatives. Religious currents and religious sentiments were certainly not willing to accept the mawīd.

They pointed out that the Sha’rāwī would never have accepted such an occasion (in fact, al-Sha’rāwī’s comments on mawīd had been quite ambivalent) and that many mawīds were un-Islamic and immoral. What was presented as particularly offensive in the headlines and commentaries was the turning of a legitimate pious celebration into a popular festival with all its entertain-ment and commerce. In this sense, the weekly religious newspaper ‘Al-‘Aqāmī commented disparagingly: ‘The mawīd of al-Sha’rāwī turned into an amusement centre of diversities and a festival of chippeas, sweets and children’s play.’

Any other mawīd would have received only a routine condemnation, if any. At all al-Sha’rāwī’s importance as an icon of the conservative religious current would have caused a serious clash between the ideal of Islamic culture and living Islamic tradition. According to these critics, al-Sha’rāwī’s memory should be celebrated, but not in such a shameful, un-Islamic way.

Islam and chippeas

Now what is so shameful and un-Islamic about chippeas? In fact, chippeas are a central symbol when describing a mawīd. ‘Leaving the mawīd without chippeas’ is a common expression for doing something while missing the actual point or use of it – chippeas – just as sweets and games – stand as an archetype for the commercial and entertaining aspects of a mawīd. This by itself would not be offensive. But in a mawīd, chippeas are part of a religious event. Sacred aspects are so closely connected to profane ones that one cannot meaningfully distinguish between the two. For the visitors to a mawīd, the festival is entertaining religion and profane fun. It is this synthesis of religion and entertainment that makes a mawīd attractive to some and so offensive to others.

Condemning the mawīd is, to a great extent, an aesthetic judgment, the festivities fail to fulfilling a modernist ideal of rational, constrained, pious, swing boats and money-games. Based on this criterion of dignity, the modernist/reformist discourse insists that occasions of

Notes

7 See e.g. ‘Abd al-‘A‘lī, Muḥammat b. Ḥaḍīth al-Bad‘ī, Fawā‘id il-ma‘ṣūmahānīs, al-Ahram (20 June 2000).