

Conversion Narratives among the Alami and Rifa'i Tariqa in Britain

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Despite predictions of decline, in the twenty-first-century Sufism has demonstrated resilience and a remarkable ability to adapt to different societies and attract new members.¹ This chapter explores the contemporary presence of Islamic Sufism in Britain by looking at reasons why individuals are drawn to its circles. Although immigration of Sufi Muslims to the West plays an important role in sustaining and increasing the membership of Sufi orders in Britain, involvement of native Britons and immigrants without prior affinity to Sufism also contributes significantly. Arguably, contemporary Sufism is filling a need for spiritual reconnection with God in an increasingly materialistic and secular society and serves to unite individuals across diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds.

A Glance through the Literature

Although literature on Sufism in the West has increased since the early 1990s, it remains uncommon to address why individuals join Islamic Sufi movements.² However, the literature does provide a useful backdrop for approaching this topic. A number of studies discuss reasons why Westerners join universal, non-Islamic Sufi movements, such as the writings of Hermansen (1998), Wilson (1998) and Genn (2007).³ Several studies also explore conversion to Islam through Sufism, including Köse (1996), Smith (1999) and Jawad (2006).⁴ In addition, research on particular Sufi *tariqas* (orders) frequently indicates briefly how the movements attracted local followings.⁵ For example, Stjernholm (2009) describes how the

Naqshbandi-Haqqani became established in London. In my doctoral study, I included an in-depth chapter exploring why the *murids* (students of the *shaykh*) joined the Alami *tariqa* in the United States.⁶ They were mostly Americans who had embraced Islam and their adult children who were raised Muslim, in addition to a few Muslim immigrants from South Asia.

This chapter attempts to show that Sufism serves as an outlet for those who are disenchanted with materialistic existence and seeking spiritual fulfilment. Most who join Sufism express a feeling that something was incomplete or unsettled in their lives. This may have manifested itself very subtly or overtly as a sense of meaningless, perceived spiritual void, lack of intimacy with the divine, or desire for a like-minded community. This appears to be applicable for both non-Muslims and Muslims, as this study substantiates. The continued affiliation to Sufism of Muslim immigrants who arrive in the West already holding membership in a Sufi order, in contrast, is frequently associated with a desire to uphold ethnic and religious identity and retain a connection to their homelands.⁷

Westerners are often attracted to Sufism by creative expressions such as Sufi poetry, anecdotal stories, dancing and music.⁸ The internet is also playing a role in spreading awareness of Sufism and Sufi movements, thus attracting new members to both Islamic and universal Sufism.⁹ Ali Köse, in his 1996 study of British converts to Islam, found that many who associated with Sufism were rejecting Western culture and values, including materialism, over-secularization and the established religious traditions.¹⁰ They frequently expressed discontent with their former religious traditions, and many had a history of depression and other psychological struggles.¹¹ It is common for Westerners to experiment with various New Age and alternative religious movements before joining Sufism.¹² Western women, in particular, are sometimes attracted to the Sufi Path as an alternative to restrictive religious traditions in which they were raised.¹³ Sufism is unique because it offers experiential avenues through which to pursue a personal relationship with the divine while being grounded by an established monotheistic religion.¹⁴

Regarding reasons why Muslims in the West join Sufism, the literature implies that the main influences are leadership qualities, personal magnetism and ethnicity of the *shaykh*. Itzhak Weismann (2007), for example, states that Shaykh Nazim's Naqshbandi-Haqqani *tariqa* tends to draw Muslim members of two types: South Asians who are attracted by the *shaykh's* charisma and ethnic Turks who turn to him as a scholar who can interpret Islam for the contemporary world.¹⁵ In addition, Shaykh Nazim attracts Westerners who are in search of

'spiritual enlightenment'. The writings of Pnina Werbner demonstrate that Sufi movements are periodically reinvigorated by charismatic *shaykhs*, particularly those who undergo challenges by travelling outside the Muslim world and morally 'conquering' previously non-Muslim space, thereby both developing and demonstrating charisma.¹⁶ According to sociologist Max Weber, charisma refers to:

... a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary.¹⁷

Over time, Sufi movements experience a natural 'waxing' and 'waning' as leadership and socio-cultural elements shift.¹⁸ For Muslims who are disenchanted with British society, Sufism provides an alternative to movements espousing radical and Islamist ideals.¹⁹

My earlier study involving 35 *murids* of the Alami *tariqa* in NY, confirmed that the desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God is a primary motivating factor for joining Sufism.²⁰ It also found that personal, transformational experiences play a critical role in the decision, which is not usually discussed in the literature. In addition, the charisma of the *shaykh*, a desire for intellectual spiritual development and yearning for spiritual healing were important elements. Contrary to Köse's (1996) study, my research did not find rejection of cultural norms to be a predominant reason, as only two of the respondents reported dissatisfaction with Western society.²¹

Sufism in Britain: The Alami and Rifa'i Tariqa

This study involved survey and interview research with 21 British Muslims affiliated with Sufism. Most of the research participants were either members of Shaykh Asaf's Alami *tariqa* or Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri's loosely connected Rifa'i Sufi community. In addition, the study included two *murids* of Shaykh Kabir Helminski's Mevlevi Threshold Society and an individual who did not specify allegiance to any particular *shaykh*, all three of whom took part in the Sufi activities in Luton along with a number of *murids* of Shaykh Fadhlalla.

The Alami *tariqa* and Shaykh Fadhlalla's community are transnational, Islamically oriented Sufi movements that have been present in Britain since the mid-1980s. These Sufi movements are related by the Rifa'i connection in

their spiritual lineage (*silsila*), but differ in subtle ways regarding their structure and leadership. The Alami Order, with its reverence to long-standing *tariqa* traditions, represents a form of contemporary, but traditional Sufism that has acculturated to modern Western culture. Shaykh Fadhlalla, on the other hand, prefers not to be identified with any formal *tariqa*.²² In the spirit of unity and universalism, he refers to himself as a 'post-*tariqa shaykh*'. Regardless of these distinctions, they are 'two sides of the same coin', as several *murids* in Luton explained, meaning that the essence of their teachings is the same. They have developed distinct transnational frameworks meant to be socially relevant to the lifestyles of contemporary individuals seeking spiritual awareness across ethnic and physical dimensions.

The Alami *tariqa* is led by Shaykh Asaf of the Balkans, who received his *hilafetnameh* (title of 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.²³ His *silsila* is traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad through both Shaykh Ahmad al-Rifa'i al-Husseini, founder of the Rifa'i *tariqa*, and Shaykh Muhammad Hayati Sultan, founder of the Hayati branch of the Khalwati *tariqa*. Shaykh Asaf is highly educated in both Islamic and Western institutions, having memorized the Qur'an by the age of 13 and later earned four doctorate degrees (MD, DVM, PhD., DSc).²⁴ He presently lives in the United States and serves as the director of the Uranium Medical Research Centre, Inc., and, in this capacity, uses his knowledge to increase understanding of global nuclear effects. He is also an internationally recognized poet, and his literary works are included in the Vatican's *Anthology of Spiritual Poetry on Christ*.²⁵

Previously identified with the Rifa'i *tariqa*, Shaykh Asaf was given permission to establish the Alami branch in the mid-1980s. In Arabic, *alami* means 'of the world, universe, creation'.²⁶ Although it is common for the name of the *tariqa* to indicate the founder and leader of a Sufi order, in this case it describes its larger purpose. Identifying this Sufi order as the Alami *tariqa* signifies that Sufism is not limited to a particular place or ethnic population. Also, this *tariqa* is dedicated to relieving the suffering of humankind through the programs of the non-profit, humanitarian organization World Life Institute, which was established in 1987.²⁷ While the main headquarters of the Alami *tariqa* are in New York State, *murids* and small communities are spread across the globe in Britain, the Balkans, Western Europe, Scandinavia, Turkey, the Middle East, South Asia and South Africa. Shaykh Asaf visits Britain periodically and holds annual Sufi gatherings in Europe.

Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri is from Karbala, Iraq, and descends from a lineage of distinguished spiritual leaders. Similarly to Shaykh Asaf, he also bridges the East and West, having memorized the Qur'an at a young age and pursued higher education in Europe and the United States. He founded a number of companies in the Middle East and worked as a consultant in the oil industry. Shaykh Fadhlalla received his *hilafetnameh* from Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi of the Shadhili *tariqa*, Shaykh Asaf of the Rifa'i *tariqa*, as well as from the Chishti *tariqa*.²⁸ Currently, though he does not identify with any of the formal *tariqas*, preferring to be without titles and more universal in his approach to Sufism. Shaykh Fadhlalla established Sufi communities in the United States, Britain and the Middle East. In the 1980s and 1990s, he resided in Berkshire, England, before moving to South Africa. He continues to visit Britain a few times a year. Shaykh Fadhlalla is known for establishing the Zahra Trust, a charitable organization, and the Academy of Self Knowledge (ASK), which offers online courses for spiritual advancement. He published an autobiography, *Son of Karbala*, in 2006.

Religious conversion

Historically, Sufism is recognized for its role in spreading Islam, and it continues to play an important part in Europeans becoming Muslim.²⁹ Islam is the second largest religion in Britain, with an estimate of nearly 2.5 million adherents.³⁰ Conversion to Islam in Britain has nearly doubled in the last decade, with figures as high as 100,000, according to the comprehensive study conducted by Faith Matters,³¹ although the 2011 Census is more conservative, estimating 60,000. Unfortunately, it is not possible to estimate the number of those involved in Sufism because there is no central registration, and joining a Sufi movement is typically a private event. In addition, those pursuing the Sufi Path may not be willing to identify themselves or discuss their membership. Historically, 'Sufi' has rarely been used in reference to individuals, 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.³² Although members of the same Sufi movement frequently live in proximity of one another, forming a Sufi community, it is also common for members to be scattered around the world individually or in satellite communities, contributing to transnational networks.³³

Traditional Sufi *tariqas* have a strict concept of membership, with an inner circle of individuals who are official *murids*. The formal ceremony of joining Sufism and becoming a *murid* is called 'taking *intisab*'. In *The Sufi Code of*

Conduct, Shaykh Asaf discusses the step-by-step transformational process through which someone interested in Sufism traverses.³⁴ After finding a Sufi *shaykh* who is willing to accept *murids*, an initial step that may take many years of searching, it is up to the individual to evaluate the *shaykh* for spiritual advancement and sincerity towards God. Simultaneously, the *shaykh* assesses the potential student for genuineness, spiritual advancement and compatibility. Following this period of assessment, which can be very lengthy (several years) or short (a few minutes), the *shaykh* may invite the seeker to take *intisab*. This ceremony involves a reaffirmation of the declaration of faith (*shahada*) and an oath of allegiance to the *shaykh* (*bayah*). In the Alami *tariqa*, *intisab* takes place in a private, formal ceremony in which only other *murids* are present.³⁵ Thereafter, the student and shaykh are considered to be spiritually linked. This *bayah* is believed to have origins in the Qur'an (48:10), 'Verily, those who give you their allegiance, they give it but to God Himself'. The *wali allah* (friends of God, saints; that is, Sufi *shaykhs*) are considered to be the spiritual successors of the prophets.

Since joining a Sufi movement involves a religious change, it may be identified as a type of religious conversion. According to Lewis Rambo and Charles Farhadian (1999), religious conversion refers to 'changing from one religious tradition to another, changing from one group to another within a tradition . . . [and] the intensifying of religious beliefs and practices'.³⁶ Religious conversion is understood as a complex, on-going process that takes place in the socio-cultural context of life. Although it may involve an extraordinary transformational event, it is not primarily defined by it.³⁷ Elaborating on the conversion process, Rambo (1993) provides a flexible seven stage model: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.³⁸ This study is concerned with the time leading up to and including the commitment to join Sufism.

Sufism is historically and traditionally connected to Islam. However, particularly in the West, a significant number of spiritual movements have developed that refer to themselves as Sufis, but have little or no connection to Islam. Thierry Zarcone suggests that Europeans who have joined Sufism, particularly those influenced by René Guénon and other Western writers, often idealize Sufism, which then becomes separated from its history and distinct from its counterpart in Islamic societies.³⁹ Regardless of the reality that a number of Westerners involved in Sufi movements have not formally embraced Islam, this study focuses on those who joined Sufi movements that uphold Islam as essential to Sufism. Formal involvement in the Alami and Rifa'i *tariqa* requires

the *shahada*. It should be noted that in Arabic, there is no direct translation of religious 'conversion'.⁴⁰ Instead, the concept of becoming Muslim is described by the verb *aslama*, meaning literally 'to submit.' The Qur'an (4:125) identifies a Muslim as someone who 'submits his whole self to God, does good, and follows the way of Abraham, the true in faith.' Particularly among certain groups of Muslims, embracing Islam is identified as a 'reversion' instead of a 'conversion.' This is because the Qur'an (7:172) states that all souls bowed to God prior to being born, indicating that everyone was born in a state of obedience to God (i.e. a Muslim). Therefore, embracing Islam later in life is considered by many Muslims to be a return, or reversion, to the original belief in God.⁴¹

While it is useful for academic purposes to view joining Sufism as a religious conversion, this approach is unsuited for those who are informally involved in Sufism. This includes Muslims who have an inclination towards the Ahl-as Sunna wa-jamaat (literally meaning 'the people of the Prophet's way and the community') but have not taken *bayah* with a *shaykh*.⁴² This relationship is particularly common among ethnic communities whose culture respects elements of Sufism, such as those in South Asia. Also, 'conversion' is inappropriate for spiritual seekers who frequently participate in various spiritual paths without strict or lasting dedication. Since they uphold essential truths common to many religions, spiritual seekers may not view changing from one religious path to another in the same light as those who focus on doctrinal differences. Paul Heelas (2000) suggests that 'a turning within' more accurately describes those on an 'ever-changing quest'.⁴³ Admittedly, conversion can be 'awkward', as Donald Taylor (1999) discusses in his three categories of conversions called 'inward, outward and awkward'.⁴⁴ He suggests that Sufism falls into the awkward category, particularly when it does not involve ceremonial rituals or indicate full acceptance of the beliefs and practices of Islam on behalf of the individual.

Since human experiences have commonalities and shared elements, several theme-based categories have been identified among conversion narratives. John Loftland and Norman Skonovd (1981) suggest six common motif experiences: intellectual, experimental, mystical, affectional, revivalism and coercive.⁴⁵ A later study by Ali Köse and Kate Miriam Loewenthal in 2000 found the intellectual, experimental and affectional motifs to be the most prevalent, having each been reported by about 67 per cent of their British research participants who converted to Islam.⁴⁶ The affectional and mystical motifs were more common among those involved in Sufism, indicating that personal feelings and unusual experiences played a more common role in their conversion to Islam.

Marcia Hermansen (1999) discusses 'Sufi-oriented narratives' as a distinct genre within conversion narratives.⁴⁷ Her research indicates four common themes among these narratives including emphasis on the importance of adhering to *shari'ah* law, the search for a spiritual teacher, the inner transformation into a Muslim, and critiques of Western culture. Another theme that may be added is focus on the journey. The physical and spiritual journey can be observed in autobiographies such as *The Book of Strangers* by Scottish-born Ian Dallas, who is also known as Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi of the Murabitun Movement.⁴⁸

Although conversion narratives in the form of first-person autobiographies provide valuable insight into the experience, they have limitations for academic research. The narratives may be inadequate regarding important details, lack accuracy and influenced by external factors, such as cultural biases, gender and common literary styles of the time.⁴⁹ Although these concerns are present in this study, it is expected that they are lessened since each research participant responded to similar questions on the survey and/or during the interview. However, there is no way of assuring that the narratives accurately relay the facts of what happened. The possibility remains that they could have been influenced by numerous factors, including my own involvement in the Alami *tariqa* in the United States. Being an insider, I had the advantage of familiarity with the philosophy and lived practices of Sufism and was able to relate to the conversion narratives through my own experiences.

Research in Britain

Research was conducted in May 2012 with 21 Sufi adherents in London, High Wycombe, Wembley, Oxford and Luton. The study involved a written survey to gather basic data, which was returned by 20 individuals, and 12 semi-structured interviews to elicit original conversion narratives. Individuals were invited for interviews based on snowball sampling and availability. All surveys and interviews were confidential, and original names have been replaced by pseudonyms. There were more women (15) than men (6) involved in the study, and all except four were raised Muslim. Half of the participants were introduced to Sufism through a family member. Nine indicated Shaykh Asaf as their teacher, eight Shaykh Fadhlalla, one both Shaykh Fadhlalla and Shaykh Asaf, two Shaykh Kabir Helminski and one did not name a *shaykh*, having been influenced by the Shi'a tradition of *irfan* (gnosis). The earliest *bayah* among the research participants

happened in 1985 with Shaykh Fadhlalla, and the three most recent occurred in 2011, one with each of the three *shaykhs* mentioned above. The eldest *murid* at the time of the study was 74, and the youngest was 18. Nearly everyone had pursued higher education, including 10 who had pursued post-graduate study. The courses of study included a law degree, postgraduate study in social work, healthcare, geography and classes in holistic healing and accounting.

Although all respondents lived in the United Kingdom at the time of this research, except for one who had recently moved, only seven (33%) were born in Britain. The others originated from Pakistan, India, Germany, Uganda, Algeria, Morocco, South Africa, and the United States. The most common ancestral background, indicated by 65 per cent of the respondents, was South Asian (Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian). Following this, four indicated having African ancestry (North African, West African and African American), and four had Western European ancestry. As anticipated, most of the research participants were first or second generation immigrants to Britain. Only the three participants with British ancestry indicated that they were more than the third generation to have lived in the United Kingdom.

On the survey, the research participants were first asked to describe how they came to the Sufi Path in an open-ended question. This was followed by a request to indicate their five primary reasons for joining Sufism from nine pre-determined options, which were based on the literature. The survey question was as follows:

Please rank your top five reasons for deciding to become a *murid*:

(Ranking scale: 1 = primary reason, 5 = least important)

- ___ Personal, mystical experiences
- ___ Charisma/leadership style of the *shaykh*
- ___ Desire for spiritual healing
- ___ Dissatisfaction with previous religious/spiritual path
- ___ Desire for intellectual spiritual development
- ___ Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God
- ___ Supportive community of faith
- ___ Fulfilling an expectation of family or community
- ___ Dissatisfaction with dominant social and moral norms

Please specify: _____

___ Other: _____

Reasons for joining Sufism

Based on the survey results, the most common reason for joining Sufism was a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God (Table 7.1). This was also indicated most often as the primary reason for joining Sufism, by just over half of the respondents (55%). This confirms that individuals who join Sufism are looking for spiritual fulfilment and a deeper relationship with the Divine, regardless of whether their religious background was Islam or another tradition. Following this primary motivation, three answers received the same number of responses, tying for second, third and fourth places. These include personal, mystical experiences, charisma/leadership style of the *shaykh* and desire for intellectual spiritual development. The high ranking of mystical experiences indicates that 70 per cent had out of the ordinary, transformational events that helped to confirm that this path was right for them. Likewise, the charisma and personality of the *shaykh* played a critical role for individuals connecting to this spiritual path. The significant number who indicated desiring for intellectual spiritual development shows that these Sufi movements respect and encourage the pursuit of spiritual as well as academic knowledge. The fifth most common reason for joining Sufism was the desire for spiritual healing, indicated by half of the respondents.

The research participants were asked on the survey to indicate their top five reasons for becoming a *murid*. These are the un-weighted results from 20 responses.

Strikingly, these are the same top five reasons that were indicated by the Alami *murids* in the United States, with only slight differences in percentages. The largest distinction was in the number who indicated having a desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God. This was documented by 75 per cent in

Table 7.1 Most Common Reasons for Joining Sufism

Rank	Reason	Total Responses (out of 20)
1	Desire for a more meaningful, personal certainty of God	15
2/3/4	Personal, mystical experience	14
2/3/4	Charisma/leadership style of the shaykh	14
2/3/4	Desire for intellectual spiritual development	14
5	Desire for spiritual healing	10

the United Kingdom compared to 89 per cent in the United States. Also, a few more in the United States than in Britain noted having had personal, mystical experiences (70% compared to 83%). However, this variance may be due to the difference in wording, since the broader word 'transformational' was used in the American survey instead of 'mystical'. Charisma of the *shaykh* and desire for intellectual spiritual development received more responses among British participants (70% compared to 60%), and desire for healing received nearly equal percentage of votes in both studies (50% compared to 49%).

Although their survey responses were remarkably similar, the conversion narratives of the *murids* in the United States and Britain differed dramatically. In contrast to my previous research with Alami *murids* in the United States, most of the research respondents in Britain were raised Muslim. Only four had been raised non-Muslim (19%). Since both Shaykh Fadhlalla and Shaykh Asaf transcend sectarian divides, it is unsurprising that there were a mix of participants from Sunni and Shi'a backgrounds. In total, 11 indicated Sunni upbringings and 6 Shi'a. Although the identity labels are useful for analyzing their conversion narratives, a vast majority of the research participants did not identify with these labels at the time of the research and preferred to be simply called Muslim. In the discussion below, the conversion narratives are explored further for trends and themes.

Those raised Muslim

Among those born and raised Muslim, many joined Sufism as a way to connect with the essence of Islam. They expressed that before joining Sufism they had difficulty fitting in with other Muslims and did not feel fulfilled by attending the mosques. They had observed hypocrisy and superficiality in the rituals, which initiated an inquiry into what was 'true' Islam as opposed to cultural religious practices. In contrast to many non-Muslims who join Sufi movements, most of the Muslims in this study were not actively seeking a spiritual guide and did not experiment with other religions or spiritual paths. Many were introduced by a professional acquaintance or family member, typically a spouse, who invited them to a *dhikr* circle (gathering to remember God). Among the reasons that attracted them to join Sufism were the way the *shaykh* practised Islam without hypocrisy and explained concepts, as well as his charismatic, striking personality. The affectional, mystical, and intellectual motifs of Köse and Loewenthal's (2000)

study were prominent in their conversion narratives, as was Hermansen's (1999) theme of 'inner transformation into a Muslim'.

Although this study did not confirm dissatisfaction with mainstream Western cultural values as a major reason for joining Sufism, the findings indicate that an important factor was discontent with Islam as it was practiced in mainstream mosques. Only 4 of the 20 survey respondents indicated dissatisfaction with social norms in their top 5 reasons for joining Sufism. For example, Abdul Kareem struggled to connect with other Muslims and questioned the Shi'a practices, particularly concerning the apparent increase in 'bipolar' behaviour during Muharram – how many Shi'a were distraught and upset in the mosque, but content and happy after leaving it. Farida also explained that she found Islam oppressive as a child because of the overbearing threats of hellfire. She knew she was blessed to have been raised Muslim, but the Islam she witnessed did not resonate with her. Attending Shaykh Fadhlalla and Shaykh Asaf's talks allowed her to grasp the transformational message of Islam. Another research participant, Nabihah, described how she had prayed for approximately nine years for personal guidance and a community that properly followed Islam and with which God was pleased. She was bored with life and knew there was more to it but could not find fulfilment from attending the mosques. When she was invited to *dhikr* and eventually met Shaykh Asaf, she knew exactly that this was an answer to her prayers.

Khalid's conversion narrative provides another interesting example of this. He was introduced to Shaykh Fadhlalla in 1985, making him the first to become a *murid* among the research participants. Also, he was one of the few who experienced a crisis moment in his life, after which he went in search of a guide. Khalid explained that he became aware of the meaninglessness of a life that is focused on material pursuits. Soon after, he began praying regularly and went on Hajj. While circumambulating the Kaaba, he grasped the *kiswah* (cloth covering the Kaaba) and demanded that God give him guidance. About a month after returning to Britain, he attended Muharram commemorations, during which he was fully aware of the insincerity and shallowness among those present. Outside the mosque, he interacted with an American Muslim selling books and was invited to lunch. The lunch, unknown to him beforehand, was attended by Shaykh Fadhlalla. Describing the events, Khalid said, 'I walked in, and I was shocked. I was overwhelmed by love . . . I just stood there looking at him. I thought of the *mizan* (balance, metaphorical pursuit of justice and harmony in all endeavours). This guy has this balance.' In his talks, Shaykh Fadhlalla unabashedly reproached the elitist attitude found among Shi'a, the focus on victimhood, and sense that

the world owed them something. Khalid was astounded. He had intended to visit Iran in search of a guide, but instead had found one in London. Proudly, Khalid stated during the interview, 'I can claim back my heritage from those who hijacked Islam'. He attributes the Sufi path to helping him connect with the inner meaning of Islam.

Another critical factor that Khalid's narrative highlights is the role of charisma. In the survey results, the charisma and leadership of the *shaykh* was tied for the second most common reason for joining Sufism. The sense that Shaykh Fadhlalla and Shaykh Asaf were imbued with exceptional qualities was widespread throughout the conversion narratives. Charisma of the *shaykh* is closely linked to the prevalence of personal, mystical experiences. Several indicated that the initial interactions with their *shaykhs* were very powerful. For example, Farida commented that she was 'mesmerized' by Shaykh Asaf's words and knew instantly that he was her teacher. A few described having had dreams in which the *shaykhs* appeared. Leena mentioned a transformational moment at a Sufi gathering in which she sensed being called and looked up to see Shaykh Fadhlalla watching her. In addition, Kareema spoke of how her father, who was on his deathbed, astounded the doctors by living eight weeks longer than predicted. Her family, which was initially suspicious of her involvement in Sufism, attributed his improvement to the healing *dhikr* prescriptions advised by Shaykh Fadhlalla. Others mentioned the powerful group *dhikrs* of both *shaykhs*.

Köse and Loewenthal's (2000) affectional motif was particularly prominent in the conversion narratives of two whose parents were involved in Sufism in Britain. Anna was six years old when her British mother embraced both Islam and Sufism. After this, she was raised in a spiritual Muslim environment but still attended Christian worship services sometimes with her friends. When she was 14, Anna decided to take the *shahada* while attending a Sufi gathering hosted by Shaykh Asaf. Since Shaykh Asaf had been an important part of her life and almost like family, she felt a special bond with him. Although eager to become a *murid* at the age of 15, Shaykh Asaf rarely accepts students under the age of 18, at which point Anna took *bayah* and officially joined the *tariqa*. Likewise, Taqwa felt a strong connection to Shaykh Fadhlalla because both of her parents were *murids* and she had spent time with him and his grandchildren in South Africa. She was highly influenced by her parents' deep respect for Shaykh Fadhlalla. Around the age of 13 or 14, her understanding developed as to why her parents regarded him so highly, and she decided to dedicate herself to following his teachings, too. In total, only three indicated that they were fulfilling an expectation of their family among their top five reasons for joining Sufism.

One research participant, who was raised in the United States by parents who embraced Islam and joined Sufism, had a very different experience. Through his family's interactions with various *shaykhs* in the United States and his travels in Pakistan and Iran, Dawud became aware of the potential danger of misguided spiritual leaders. Although he had not taken *bayah* with anyone, Dawud considers himself to be involved in Sufism and identifies particularly with the Shi'a tradition of *irfan*, or gnosis. The practice of not making allegiance with living *shaykhs* is common among some Sufi orders, for example, the Iranian Oveyessi Sufi mystic tradition.⁵⁰

Those raised Non-Muslim

Among the four research participants who had been raised non-Muslim, their religious backgrounds were Christianity, Agnosticism and Hinduism. Three of them were looking for spiritual guidance and joined Islam through Sufism. Layla was the most active in her search for spiritual direction, and her story corresponds with Köse and Loewenthal's (2000) 'experimental' motif and Hermansen's (1999) Sufi theme of 'searching for a spiritual teacher.' Prior to learning about Sufism, Layla was involved in Christian mysticism, Buddhism and Hinduism but did not stay long with any of them. She had three spiritual guides in succession, starting with a Christian mystic who told her pre-emptively, 'You are a Sufi.' A few years later, Layla discovered a book by Irina Tweedie and was amazed and encouraged by her personal journey with a Sufi master. Unsure of how to proceed and locate a Sufi *shaykh*, it was two years until a breakthrough – someone she knew professionally told her about Shaykh Asaf. After writing to him, Layla experienced an overwhelming feeling that this was the guide for whom she had been waiting. In 1996, she flew to the United States to meet him and, while there, took the *shahada* and *bayah*.

Hassan was the only research participant with a non-Abrahamic religious background. Born in Uganda, he was raised Hindu by his Indian parents, and they moved to Britain when he was 10. Years later, he was introduced to Sufism through his wife, who was actively searching for a spiritual path and guide. When she started attending *dhikrs* in London and listening to Shaykh Fadhlalla's talks, Hassan would sometimes join her. Slowly, his interest and commitment increased, and about three years after his wife joined Sufism, he also embraced Islam and was accepted as a student by Shaykh Fadhlalla.

In contrast to those looking for spiritual guidance, Safiya encountered Sufism without intending to find it. Her conversion narrative has elements of Köse and Loewenthal's (2000) affectional, experimental and intellectual motifs but is not strictly defined by any of them. Instead, it is best described as an example of a 'journey' Sufi conversion. Safiya was born in India near the end of British imperialism, after which her family moved to Britain. Following her university study, she took a teaching position in Northern Nigeria and settled into life there, marrying a Muslim who had three other wives, and bearing two children. She lived and worked there for 16 years, 4 years beyond the sudden death of her husband, before returning to Britain with her young boys. At that point, she had not become Muslim mostly due to how she perceived Muslim women to be treated. As a Christian/Agnostic, she felt she had better standing in Nigerian culture.

Back in Britain, Safiya attempted to reconnect with Christianity, but disagreed with some of the theology, and her children found Sunday School to be uninteresting. In her teaching position, she interacted with Muslims of different backgrounds and was strongly influenced towards embracing Islam by a Shi'a Muslim. Eventually, in 1992, Safiya took the *shahada*. Although she had accepted the Islamic faith, she faced difficulty being Muslim. She struggled to keep it up on her own and embody the new socio-cultural identity, such as not participating in the Christmas holidays, which were a beloved part of her family's activities. She also did not appreciate the sectarian tensions that became apparent to her after embracing Islam. Experiencing a crisis of faith, Safiya called an Islamic help-line and was given the phone number of a 'Sufi' woman, who was one of Shaykh Fadhlalla's wives. Up until that point, she had not encountered Sufism. After speaking with Shaykh Fadhlalla's wife and another woman, she found she had a better sense of inner stability. She was then invited to a *dhikr* circle.

Even though Safiya found the worship event a little disconcerting, for example, the soulful and breathy repetitions of God's Names, she continued attending mostly because she enjoyed the company of the people. They were from diverse ethnic backgrounds and had a 'sweetness to them' that she had not experienced at other Muslim gatherings. She appreciated how respectfully the men treated the women. Also, it was appealing because English was the main spoken language. After briefly meeting Shaykh Fadhlalla, Safiya continued to attend the gatherings for two years without further interaction with him. During this time, she read books and listened to his talks, taking time to determine whether to accept him as a guide. She appreciated that he was a bridge between

East and West and liked his personality and how he accepted questions. At the age of 56, she took *bayah* with him.

Reactions from family members

Although Sufism is a common cultural aspect of Islam in many Muslim countries, particularly South Asia, many research participants who were the first in their families to join a *tariqa* encountered tensions with their Muslim family members and friends. This appeared to be worse for those from a Shi'a background. For their families, Sufism was frequently considered to be a deviation from Islam. The survey responses were very telling: 'Our close friends regard us as being out of Islam.' Kareema's family thought she was getting involved with a cult. Another described her interactions with her family like a 'friendly war'. During an interview, Abdul Kareem conveyed his experience with an elder member of his family who approached him and expressed worry about their brother's involvement in Sufism. Since their father had recently died, the elder brother spoke about the need to uphold the Shi'a traditions of their family, and he expressed his desire to 'retrieve' their other brother from his folly. Much to the elder brother's shock and dismay, Abdul Kareem replied that he had met their brother's *shaykh* and thought quite highly of him. To this, the elder brother replied, mostly to himself, that they had 'lost another one'. Similarly, another found her family to be antagonistic until they had the opportunity to meet Shaykh Asaf during his *ziyarah* (pilgrimage) to the holy sites in Iraq. This unplanned meeting, which demonstrated to them his love and respect for Ahlel Bayt (the family of the Prophet Muhammad) appeared to relieve their worry.

A few research participants grew up in families that participated in Sufi orders, and they had very different experiences from those who were the first in their families to join. For example, Nabiha's family in North Africa had been involved in Sufism for many generations, but at the time they did not know of a living *shaykh* in either their hometown or in Britain. To discover a Sufi circle in London was astounding for her. Her immediate family has been supportive, and they have had direct interactions with the *shaykh*. Another research participant was initially unaware of her family's involvement in Sufism. Tasneem was worried about her parents' reaction until she was reminded that they have a heritage of belonging to a Sufi order in South Asia, which they have become disconnected from since moving to Britain. They have been generally supportive

of her decision to take *bayah*, although they did not know much about Shaykh Asaf at the time of this study.

Final thoughts

This chapter both suggests some initial answers to the question of why individuals in Britain join Sufism and encourages further research into this topic. The research participants had very different backgrounds, demonstrating the appeal of Islamic Sufi movements throughout contemporary British society. A common experience, particularly among those raised Muslim, was to feel unfulfilled by ritualistic religious practices and desire spiritual fulfilment. Some were actively seeking a spiritual guide, but many were not. Most commonly, they were invited to *dhikr* circles through a family member or professional acquaintances. Alternatively, there were those raised as non-Muslims who were seeking spiritual guidance and embraced Islam and Sufism. It was more common for this to be a combined conversion experience, although one research participant embraced Islam before learning about Sufism. This study confirmed Köse and Loewenthal's (2000) findings that intellectual, affectional, experimental and mystical were common types of conversion experiences. Although discontent with materialism and secularism was present, this study did not substantiate joining Sufism as a way of rejecting Western cultural values, which contradicts the findings of Köse's (1996) study. In addition, there were many more women than men involved in the study, possibly supporting the idea that women in the West are more likely to turn to Sufism as a spiritual outlet.⁵¹

The charisma of the *shaykh* and, likewise, experiencing mystical, transformational events, played critical roles in the decision to join Sufism. They served to indicate that this path would be exceptional and confirm that it was 'right' for the individual. Although charisma is discussed in the literature,⁵² mystical experiences are not frequently cited, except in Köse and Loewenthal's (2000) study. Also, the ethnicity of the *shaykh* appears to have somewhat influenced the participants, as those with Shi'a backgrounds were more likely to self-identify as Shaykh Fadhlalla's *murids*. However, it is notable that none of Shaykh Asaf's *murids* were from the Balkans, nor were any of Shaykh Fadhlalla's from Iraq, their birthplaces, indicating that ethnicity was not a major factor among the participants. Although artistic elements, such as sacred music and whirling, are often presented in the literature as attractive for non-Muslims,⁵³ they are not integral parts of the traditions of the Alami or Rifa'i *tariqa* and,

therefore, were not discussed in this research. Future research, including in-depth studies of particular *tariqas* and comparative studies, would be valuable to developing this topic.

Notes

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- 7 R. Geaves (2000) *The Sufis of Britain: An Exploration of Muslim Identity*. Great Britain: Cardiff Academic Press.
- 8 M. Hermansen (1998); J. Smith (1999), p. 69.
- 9 G. Schmidt (2004) 'Sufi Charisma on the Internet' in *Sufism in Europe and North America*, D. Westerlund (Ed.), London: Routledge Curzon, pp. 109–26; M. J. Rausch (2009) 'Encountering Sufism on the Web' in *Sufism Today*, R. Catharina and L. Stenberg (Eds), London: IB Tauris, pp. 159–76.
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- 17 M. Weber (1978) *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. (2 vols.); G. Roth and C. Wittich (Eds). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, p. 241.
- 18 R. Geaves (2000), p. 117.
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- 24 For a more complete biography of Shaykh Asaf, see J. Hazen (2011), pp. 89–90.
- 25 See 'Veronikin Rubac' and 'Rio De Janeiro' in V. Lončarević (2007) (Ed.), *Krist u hrvatskom pjesnistvu. Antologija Duhovne Poezije*, Split: Verbum, pp. 600–1.
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- 30 HMG Estimation based on 2008 figures and 2011 Census data.

- 31 M. A. Kevin Brice (2010) *A Minority within a Minority: A Report on Conversion to Islam in the United Kingdom. On behalf of Faith Matters*. <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf> (accessed November 2, 2012).
- 32 C. Ernst (1997) *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., p. 26.
- 33 P. Werbner (2003); Van Bruinessen and Howell (2007); Geaves, Dressler and Klinkhammer (2009).
- 34 Shaykh Asaf (2004) *Sufi Code of Conduct*. Björboholm, Sweden: Stiftelsen Författares Bokmaskin.
- 35 Other *tariqas* are less strict on this and have allowed the *intisab* ceremony to be observed by non-*murids* or recorded and posted on the internet. See the YouTube video of Muhammad Ali taking *bayah* with Shaykh Hisham Kabbani in 2001: <http://youtube.com/watch?v=UtmuEqmNUfQ> (accessed April 27, 2011).
- 36 L. Rambo and C. Farhadian (1999) 'Converting: Stages of Religious Change' in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, C. Lamb and M. Bryant (Eds), London: Cassell, pp. 23, 23–34.
- 37 L. Rambo (1993) *Understanding Religious Conversion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 5.
- 38 L. Rambo (1993).
- 39 T. Zarcone (1999), 'Rereadings and Transformations of Sufism in the West', *Diogenes*, 47, 3, pp. 110–22, p. 117. There is disagreement as to whether or not Guénon converted to Islam and, if he did, how this should be interpreted.
- 40 Y. Dutton (1999), p. 151.
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- 48 I. Dallas (1972) *The Book of Strangers*. New York: Pantheon Books.

- 49 M. Hermansen, (1999), p. 56.
- 50 See K. Spellman (2004) 'A National Sufi Order with Transnational Dimensions: The Maktab Tarighat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi Sufi Order in London', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 30, 5, pp. 945–60, pp. 950–1. This practice is based on the tradition of Oveys Gharani, who is said to have received spiritual teachings directly from the Prophet Muhammad, although he resided in Yemen and had never physically met the prophet of Islam.
- 51 See the writings by H. Jawad (2006).
- 52 P. Werbner (1996); I. Weismann (2007).
- 53 J. Smith (1999), p. 69.

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