

The Legalisation of the Deviation of Tasawwuf

By Shaykh Abdalhaqq Bewley

As many of you will know, a group of us were invited earlier this year to a meeting of Sufi tariqas in Marrakesh organized by the Moroccan Ministry of Awqaf. I would first like to say that the event was extremely well organised and that the hospitality of our hosts was impeccable from beginning to end. I am, however, using our experience there as an illustrative example of a worldwide phenomenon whereby *tasawwuf* – sometimes consciously, frequently unconsciously – has been utilised to serve the purposes of a political agenda which has nothing to do with Islam and which ends up presenting it as something very different from what it has always been throughout Islamic history.

I will start by quoting directly from the official website of the Sidi Chiker Gathering – the name given to the meeting we were attending – a list which can in a way be summarised as the stated objectives of the organisation:

The idea which presides over the Sidi Chiker Gathering rests on the conviction that the Sufic Path, which has its source in the Qur'an and Prophetic Tradition, has contributed everywhere throughout the Muslim world to the edification of Islamic society and its civilisation in numerous ways:

- Spreading Islam by peaceful means and by example.
- Elaboration of methods for assuring a professional class among the Muslims.
- Elaboration of a moral path for the perfecting of the individual at a religious and social level.
- Diffusion of the love of God among the People of the Path.
- Giving weight to the interior dimension of Islam and assisting the individual in the acquisition of noble virtues.

- Promoting cooperation and solidarity
- Establishing an intellectual and literary patrimony with the object of promoting a spirit of self-abnegation and love of truth, that truth whose knowledge gives man the aspiration to remain true to the sacred trust of *tawhid* which he takes on in conformity with the noble mission which God has assigned to him.

Now I would like to contrast that agenda with the comparatively recent historical examples, from the 19th and 20th centuries, of five different tariqas across the Muslim world. Let us first take the example of the Naqshbandi Tariqa in the Caucasus. At the beginning of the 19th Century the Russian Empire expanded into the Caucasus which had, until that time, been an Ottoman territory. The task of defending Islam against Russian domination fell to the hands of the Naqshbandi tariqa under the leadership of Imam Shamil. The first battle against the Russians was fought in 1832 under the leadership of the then leader of the tariqa Shaykh Mansur. He was killed and the murids were utterly defeated. Only two escaped the slaughter, one of whom was the badly wounded Imam Shamil, a highly educated *'alim* respected for the depth of his knowledge throughout the whole of the Caucasus. He recovered from his wounds and went on to re-establish the rule of shari'a throughout Daghestan and Chechenya. For the next nearly 30 years until 1859 he fought tooth and nail in the face of incredible hardships and personal tragedies to preserve the integrity of the deen in the Caucasus. He was finally forced to surrender but, by Allah, was treated with great respect by his Russian captors and received by the Czar himself. He was exiled to a mansion in Kiev, where he spent nearly 10 years. He was finally granted permission to go on Hajj and en route was greeted with great honour by the Ottoman Sultan, becoming his guest in the Topkapi. The seal was set on his glorious life, after the completion of his final Hajj, by his death in Madina and his burial alongside the Companions of the Messenger of Allah, *salla'llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, in the cemetery of al-Baqi.

My second example is the Qadiriyya Tariqa on the other side of the Muslim world in Algeria. There is, strangely enough, a direct connection with Imam Shamil. Imam Shamil went on Hajj for the first time as a young man in 1825. While he was there he met another very learned young *'alim* from the town of Mascara in western Algeria whose name was Abdalqadir al-Hasani. They apparently spent a lot of time together and spoke at length on many different topics, including that of how to defend the deen in the face of the serious threat of the encroaching colonial powers. Not long after Abdalqadir returned to the land of his birth the French invaded Algeria. He became shaykh of the Qadiri Tariqa and for the next seventeen years, under the title Amir Abdalqadir al-Jaza-iri, he fought tirelessly against the French domination of his native land and the imposition of a legal system contrary to the laws of Allah which that entailed. The inhuman nature of French brutality against his countrymen eventually forced Amir Abdalqadir to surrender and, in violation of a promise they had made to allow him to go to a Muslim land, they exiled him to France. As in the case of Imam Shamil, however, they treated him with respect, confining him in the Chateau of Amboise in the Loire Valley. The purity of his *niyya* was confirmed by the fact that he was soon allowed to go to Damascus where he spent the rest of his life, eventually being buried at the feet of his acknowledged master, Shaykh al-Akbar Ibnu'l'Arabi al-Hatimi.

There is a postscript to this story that shows that the work of the *awliya* extends beyond their death and which also has immediate relevance to our gathering here today. At a certain point in the fairly early days of his Islam, our esteemed *ra'is*, Abu Bakr Rieger, reached the end of his tether with the situation we were then in in Freiburg and, breaking loose, decided to run off with Fatiha to get away from the community and everything connected to it. They arrived at the River Loire and decided to visit the Chateau of Amboise, knowing, of course, nothing whatsoever about its history. They connected with a tour which was being taken around the castle and imagine the surprise of the the *ra'is* when suddenly, out of nowhere, he heard the tour guide say, "This is the apartment where Shaykh Abdalqadir lived while he was in

France.” He later told me that that was the moment he realised that there was no escape and that his destiny was sealed!

My third example is that of the Mahdiyya Tariqa in Sudan. Towards the end of the 19th century Muhammad Ahmad, known as the Mahdi, drove the British and their influence out of Sudan and established the rule of the *shari’a* throughout the country. In 1885 he took Khartoum and made it his capital. Although he died of natural causes soon after this the Islamic governance he established remained in force for well over a decade until 1898 when his community was finally defeated by General Kitchener at the Battle of Omdurman. The fourth example is the Sanussiyya Tariqa. Under its founder and his successors the tariqa established a vast but unified area of Islamic governance from Libya right across the Sahara into West Africa and later valiantly defended it with considerable success throughout the whole of the first half of the 20th century against both the French and the Italians.

My final example is what happened with our own tariqa at the end of the first decade of the 20th century. It was clear by then that nothing was going to stop the French turning Morocco into a so-called French protectorate. A meeting of *awliya* was convened at which it was decided that our tariqa would take a two-pronged approach to the situation. The fuqara of the Middle Atlas under the Awlad Sidi Tayyibi would take up arms and fight the French, whereas Sidi Muhammad ibn al-Habib would remain in the Gharb and protect the deen, keeping it alive in the great Cities of the plains. The mountain fuqara fought on for fourteen years eventually being bombed into submission in 1926. We ourselves used to go and stay with Sidi Salih who was the shaykh of that branch of our tariqa in the 70’s and 80’s and who had himself fought and been wounded in that conflict.

And as we know we owe everything we have to the tireless work of Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib who stuck staunchly to his task and preserved the deen in the face of the French occupation for sixty years throughout both Morocco and Algeria until he was able to pass it on intact to our Shaykh who has himself been true to the task entrusted to him and has spent his life protecting it and passing it on to us. May Allah reward him and give us success in taking it on and passing it on in our turn.

I hope that what will have become clear from these five examples – and any number of other examples which could also have been elicited from every epoch of Islam – is that the primary task of the people of *tasawwuf* in each era is to take every single necessary step, no matter what the cost, to ensure the complete integrity of Islam and the greatest possible implementation of Allah’s deen, inwardly and most importantly outwardly, in the particular time and place where they find themselves. I hope it will also be clear that the list of objectives of the Sidi Shiker Gathering I read out at the start of this presentation in no way adequately reflects this reality.

At the beginning of the 1980’s it became obvious to those who run the world’s affairs that the approach that had been taken to Islam and the Muslims up to that point was no longer viable. In the pre-colonial era their approach to Islam had been one of outright hostility and rejection. The practical exigencies of colonialism changed this into an arrogant assumption of superiority and overt attempts at subversion. The post colonial period, which saw the appearance for the first time of large numbers of Muslims in the heartlands of the colonial powers, caused another change. The first approach, adopted in the belief that the colonial attempts to subvert Islam had been effective, was to simply pretend it did not exist. Once, however, it became evident that Islam was not going away and that, far from withering on the vine, new growth was springing out in every direction, a new approach was clearly needed. The burgeoning self confidence of Muslim populations throughout the world helped on by the Iranian revolution and Mujahidun successes in Afghanistan made a new strategy for dealing with Islam an urgent imperative and the one adopted was the Good Muslim, Bad Muslim dialectic. It was possible to actually see this strategy being put into place step by step over the period of a couple of years during the early 1980’s.

Good Muslims submit to the established authority of the state, play their part by working hard and effectively in the communities where they live, pay their taxes, and provide a much needed moral element in the new world order. In return for this they are permitted to worship in their mosques and to attend meetings of dhikr, as long as that does not interfere with the right of anyone else to behave in almost whatever way they like. They must

accept the status quo, become good citizens, be endlessly tolerant of other people's lifestyles whatever they are and whatever they believe in, tow the global line and on no account rock the boat. Any other kind of Muslim is de facto a bad Muslim, a fundamentalist, a fanatic, probably a terrorist, someone who wants to oppress women, stone people to death and cut off their hands and heads whenever possible.

The point is that under the terms of this dialectic there are only these two alternatives; if you are not one then you must be the other. Both of them are, of course, in Islamic terms, totally unacceptable but the depressing fact of the matter is that we, the Muslims, have by and large accepted this definition of us. The tiny minority of actual terrorists and suicide bombers, whose methods have nothing whatsoever to do with Islam and owe almost everything to the nihilistic political theories of 19th Century European anarchism, have of course played right into their hands. Almost worse than this, however, has been the willingness of the vast majority of Muslims to accept the other alternative in this false dialectic and allow themselves to be fooled into accepting its definition of what it is to be a good Muslim.

Unfortunately the majority of both the leaders and the followers of the great Sufi tariqas, who in fact at the same time constitute the vast majority of the world's Muslims, have themselves fallen into this trap and are falling over themselves in the race to be categorised as Good Muslims rather than Bad ones. Some have done this out of a purely venial motivation, chasing after the considerable funding available for groups who encourage moderation and tolerance among their followers. Others do it for political reasons in order to align themselves with the anti-terrorist, pro-democracy policies of their governments and their governments' paymasters.

Yet others do it because they simply have not understood the nature of the world they live in. It is as if they think that today's world is still the same as it was two centuries ago when the *shari'a* was still in place in many countries and a quietist approach to *tasawwuf*, sometimes permissible under strong Muslim governance which is fully implementing the *shari'a*, was still appropriate. In fact, of course, Allah's laws are being flouted in every country in the world, Muslim or non-Muslim, and every true Sufi knows that there

can be no *haqiqa* without *shari'a*. To imagine that *tasawwuf* can be properly practised in the present situation without its practioners doing everything in their power to change it shows ignorance of the real nature of the Sufic path and, as we have seen, runs completely counter to the example of our rightly guided predecessors who left no stone unturned in their determination to protect Allah's deen and see it implemented in its entirety.

Given this analysis it is clear that, wittingly or unwittingly, the Sidi Chiker Gathering, like so many organisations of a similar nature, falls squarely into the Good Muslim camp. Although there were many positive aspects to our stay in Marrakech, three unfortunate instances stand out in my memory which made this abundantly evident.

One of the lectures given during the symposium was delivered by a so-called shaykha from California. Although it was couched in more or less sufic terminology, it might as well have come straight from Haight Ashbury in 1968. It was a classic "universal peace and love" message from the height of the hippy era in which the presence of classical Islam played an absolutely minimal role but which was presented seriously as a valid depiction of the Sufic path. It took a Darqawi shaykh from Aleppo, who was unable to contain his indignation at what had been said, to stand up at the lecture's end and tell the woman in how many ways what she had put forward was totally opposed to a correct understanding of *tasawwuf*.

The second instance was connected with the actual organisation of the gathering. We were told one evening that there was going to be a session of dhikr. We went to the hall where dinner was being served. At one side of the hall there was a stage and shortly after the meal commenced a group of singers beautifully dressed in white jellabas and red fezzes appeared on it and sat in a semi circle facing the assembled guests. They proceeded, it seemed to me somewhat reluctantly, to sing qasidas in that most intoxicatingly melodious way that only Moroccan singers steeped in the centuries old Andalusian tradition are able to. The result was that the sublime verses of Ibn al-'Arabi and ibn al-Farid, describing the highest spiritual states it is possible for a human being to achieve, were drowned out by the loud clatter of hundreds of sets of cutlery and banal chatter of hundreds of careless voices,

as they were reduced to being background music to the meal. One or two of the delegates simply walked out in disgust. I am ashamed to say that I was one of the many hundreds who stayed eating the admittedly delicious food.

The third instance took place over two stages. The main administrative organisation of the gathering was conducted from the foyer of the extremely luxurious hotel in which most of the delegates were being accommodated. I had to alter my travel arrangements on the night before the last day of the gathering and the person in charge of such arrangements sat at a desk in the foyer. I had seen him dealing with the various travel problems of many delegates with the utmost efficiency and courtesy over the course of that day. In front of me was a small middle-aged American who wanted to change his business class return ticket to New York which had been paid for by our hosts. The discourtesy and foul language used by this man are difficult to describe and he treated the good natured and most proficient travel agent, who was doing his best to help him, with a contempt I was embarrassed to witness. He was full to the brim with self-importance and insisted that he had to be in New York by a certain time in order to attend a vital meeting at the United Nations with the president of one of the Central American republics. It was a ghastly display of the worst kind of American arrogance and self-obsession.

Imagine then my dismay when I discovered that this same man was to give the keynote speech on the final day of the conference. I sat there wondering what on earth he was going to say about Sufism, given the appalling behaviour I had seen from him the previous evening. It was even worse than I feared and a little way into his lecture he explicitly said that to be a Sufi you did not actually really need to be a Muslim at all. This time I did walk out. How, I wondered, could the organisers have allowed such a thing to be said in the city of Shaykh Jazuli and Qadi 'Ayad. The only conclusion I could draw was that they must indeed have been extremely eager to be considered Good Muslims.

The upshot of all this is that, as demonstrated by the Sidi Chiker Gathering and many other similar organisations throughout the world claiming to represent the Sufic Path, the role of tasawwuf within the Muslim

umma today has been deviated drastically from the pivotal crucial position it has always held throughout the whole history of Islam. The great tariqas were largely responsible for the spread of Islam around the globe in the first place, then for preserving the integrity of Islam both inwardly and outwardly – the zawiyas and khanqas of the Sufis have always been places devoted as much or more to teaching and implementing the basic practices of the deen as they have to any kind of spiritual training – and, as my examples showed, for the unremitting defence of Islam against its enemies when that became necessary.

This pernicious deviation of tasawwuf has ensured that the great tariqas have been reduced to emasculated and impotent shadows of what they were intended to be, unable to fulfil the function for which their great founders, may Allah have mercy on all of them, brought them into being. Unfortunately the deviators have all but succeeded, in that rather than being people whose lives are spent actively propagating, preserving and protecting Allah's deen in its entirety, a large number of the leaders and the great majority of the followers this deviated version of tasawwuf have become passive, docile and, in many cases, willing participants in a system which is explicitly dedicated to the destruction of Islam.

There will, however, always be true men of Allah who, by Allah, will ensure that the great tradition of real *tasawwuf*, that river of the transmission of every aspect of Islam, which had its source in the Messenger of Allah, *salla'llahu 'alayhi wa sallam*, and has illuminated and invigorated every generation of Muslims since, will never come to an end. We have Allah's promise for this and I will let Him *subhanahu wa ta'ala* have the last word as He most certainly will in all our affairs in this world and the Next. He says in *Sura at-Tawba*:

They desire to extinguish Allah's Light with their mouths.
But Allah refuses to do other than perfect His Light,
even though the kafirun detest it.

It is He who sent His Messenger
with guidance and the Deen of Truth
to exalt it over every other deen,
even though the mushrikun detest it.