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DĀRVŪ 'L-MASNAVĪ OF THE MEVLEVİ ORDER

The Importance of Islam for the Mevlevi of Istanbul

The following was witnessed and experienced during a recent visit to the Mevlevi of Istanbul:

March 31, 2004 (first day): went to the home of Mevlevi Shaykh Shafeeq Jaan [Sefik Can], who has translated Mevlana's poetry from the original Persian of the Masnavi [Mesnevi] and the Diivaan-i Kabir [Divan-i Kebir] into contemporary Turkish for many years, is nearly 95 years old, and is regarded as a "friend of God" [veli] by the Mevlevi. He is also the current Spiritual Director [Sar-i Tarikat] of the Mevlevi. Whenever the Call to Prayer [azaan] was announced from the nearby mosque, his wife would let him know it was being announced by speaking into his left ear (due to his deafness). He would stand up from his arm chair with her assistance, walk to the back of his living room, sit in a chair, and put on his white Muslim cap. He would wait for me to join him, such as when I needed to first do the ritual ablutions with water [wuzu], [aptes], and until I put a prayer rug on the floor given by his wife for my use. Then he would stand and raise his hands to his ears to begin the ritual prayer [namaaz], bow [rukku], and rise up. Then, due to the infirmity of his old age, he would sit and lean forward and put his hands on his knees while bowing-- instead of prostrating to the floor (permitted for the elderly and sick). I could see him moving next to me as the prayer leader by means of peripheral vision. I prayed like this with him once or twice during each of the four times I visited him. Once, we were doing a preliminary and voluntary [sunnah] prayer and then he left the room to renew his ritual ablutions and returned to do the obligatory [farz] afternoon ritual prayer.

April 1: was taken to the Khalwatii-Jarraahii [Helveti-Cerrahi] sufi center [dergah] by a young Mevlevi samaa'-zan [semazen] and his wife. I prayed the sunset [maghrib] prayer standing next to him together with the Jerrahi dervishes, before sharing a meal and joining in a sitting session of Arabic prayer-chanting [zikrullah]. His wife prayed with the Jerrahi women in another part of the building. I rarely saw Mevlevi women doing the ritual prayer (perhaps because I was usually with the men).

April 2: was invited to the apartment of Guzide Hanım, the widow of the late Jelaluddin Chelebi [Celaeddin Celebi]--the former hereditary and actual leader of the Mevlevi order who died in 1996--and the mother of the present "Chief Chelebi" [Makam-i Celebi], Faruk Hemdem Celebi, who is the 22nd great grandson of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi and the 33rd Chelebi. (See the [Chelebi Family Website](#)). Then I met Mevlevi Shaykh Huseyin Top, who is fluent in Arabic and has memorized much of the Qur'an. He gave an exposition of the meaning of the last three chapters [suurah] of the Qur'an (speaking in Turkish) to Guzide Hanım, three of her daughters, several of her granddaughters, their husbands, and other friends of the Celebi family. All of the women covered their heads with an untied scarf during the Qur'an lesson. Later, Shaykh Huseyin led the sunset [maghrib] ritual prayer in the library room and several of us men joined him.

April 3: was invited to a monthly Mevlevi meeting, attended by both men and women. At one point, I was asked to recite the first chapter of the Qur'an [al-Faatiha] in Arabic to the group. I sat next to Mevlevi Shaykh Kadri Yetish. At one point a Muslim memorizer of the Qur'an [haafiz] came and recited some Qur'an in Arabic and then left. I was told that another Mevlevi Shaykh, Emin Ishik Hoca (who has also memorized the Qur'an), usually leads these monthly meetings but was unable to come this time.

April 4: was invited to a Mevlevi samaa' [sema] at the Galata Melevihanise, in which the young semazens I met previously whirled more rapidly than the other (all male) semazens. Mevlevi Shaykh Huseyin Top stood on the red sheep skin [poost] with Mevlevi Shaykh Kadri Yetish standing to his left and slightly behind on a cloth of a different shade of red color. The invisible "straight line" [hatt-i istivaa]--not to be stepped on, out of respect, by the whirling dervishes--extended from the front door of the "whirling prayer hall" [semahane] to the red sheep skin [poost]-- behind which was the prayer-direction [qiblah] toward Mecca. At the end of the whirling prayer ceremony (sema), Shaykh Huseyin called for the first chapter of the Qur'an [al-Faatiha] to be said silently by all. Afterwards, the young Mevlevi semazens and his wife took me to an underground mosque where I was asked to lead the prayer for him and several other men. He also showed me the tombs there of some companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) who died during the first Muslim assault on Byzantine Constantinople. We raised our hands and prayed the Faatiha silently, the Islamic practice of praying to God for a blessing for the souls of the dead. Then we went to a section where women pray and his wife opened a gate and came out.

April 5: after praying for the sixth day the early morning [fajr] ritual prayer at the Blue Mosque across the street from my hotel, I went to a bus station and took a bus to Konya. At a rest stop, I noticed that there was a little mosque room next to the toilet area and was happy to be able to do some prayers there.

April 6: went for early morning prayers to the mosque that contains a tomb honoring the memory of Shams-i Tabrizi. After breakfast, went with the Mevlevi I was traveling with back to the "Mosque of Shams," where all of us said the Faatiha silently. Then we went to the tomb of the late Jelaluddin Chelebi and we recited the Faatiha. A Mevlevi lady showed me the nearby tombs of the last Masnavi-reciter [Mesnevi-khvaan] at the Konya dergah (who died in 1933) and the last true Dede (one who underwent the traditional 1001 days of retreat)--where we also raised our hands for Faatiha. Then we went to Mawlawi Jalaluddin Rumi's tomb and said Faatiha in front of his tomb and other tombs there.

April 7: walked to early morning prayers at the 'Alaa'uddin mosque, a place where Mevlana went for Friday congregational prayers. Later, was driven to Karaman, to the tomb of Mevlana's mother, Muumina Khatun. This tomb was inside a small mosque and also contained the tomb of Mevlana's older brother, 'Alaa' uddeen, as well as many other tombs of descendants. I did some voluntary ritual prayers there, as did two Mevlevi women and a Mevlevi man who came with us. The ladies had their heads covered when they came into the mosque. We all raised our hands for Faatiha next to the tomb of Rumi's mother. I prayed in several places at the side of her tomb, convinced that Mevlana and his father must have done ritual prayers in that place. Then we returned to Konya and prayed Faatiha at the tomb of Fakhrū n-Nisā [Fahrūnīsa] (who was Mevlana's most saintly woman disciple), at the tomb of the late Suleyman Hayati Dede (formerly the Shaykh of Konya--appointed to this position as the deputy [vakil] of Jelaleddin Chelebi) who died in 1985, and also at the tomb of Dede's wife Fereshte Hanım who died in 1994. Then we returned to Mevlana's tomb, where I sat on the floor next to two Mevlevi ladies. A visiting Muslim scholar from India sat next to us and recited the chapter of Mercy [al-Rahman] from the Qur'an from memory and then he led some invocatory prayers [du'a]. One of the Mevlevi ladies then recited a du'a in Turkish and blessed a small child. After closing time, I went to the beautiful Selimiye mosque next door to do some namaaz.

April 8: took the train back to Istanbul. Met Mevlevi Shaykh Nail Kesova, who leads a weekly whirling prayer class for men. He told of how he teaches marbling [ebru], an art form which produces beautiful "rippling" colored patterns on paper, as well as doing Arabic calligraphy. I also met a man who has been the imam of a beautiful mosque for the past 20 years, who is also a Mevlevi, a friend of the Chelebi family, and who came to the whirling prayer class that evening to improve his whirling.

April 9: was driven to the building where Guzide Hanım lives and was honored to meet Chelebi Efendi (Faruk Hemdem Celebi) for the first time. He got into the car and we were driven to the tomb of another companion of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in Istanbul, Eyup Sultan. We stood in front of the outside grating of the building containing the tomb and said Faatiha and then walked to the mosque next to it, where I prayed the preliminary [sunnah] prayer next to Chelebi Efendi. I felt very blessed to pray with him. He is a very sincere and dedicated leader of the Mevlevi. Was invited to dinner at someone's house together with Mevlevi Shaykh Emin Ishik and a sister of Chelebi Efendi (who said she was going to Mecca for the "lesser pilgrimage" [umra] in a week together with about twenty other Turkish ladies). The mother of this family had died and they asked Shaykh Emin to recite some Qur'an (especially the Chapter called Ya-Sin) as a blessing for the departed. All the ladies had their heads covered. I was asked to recite some Qur'an from memory first, which I was able to do. Later in the evening, Haafiz Emin Ishik led a weekly Masnavi [Mesnevi] lesson for a group of about 30 men. He used the Mesnevi translation of Taahiri 'l-Mevlevi (died 1951), the teacher of Shaykh Shafeeq Jaan--who completed the last volumes of his teacher's translation from Persian. His talk was entirely in Turkish and I could not follow it, except that I heard him occasionally reading from the Persian text (which he could pronounce due to his ability to read Arabic script). After an evening meal, Shaykh Nail Kesova led the weekly Mevlevi men's practice [mashq, meshk] of singing Turkish sufi hymns [elahi] to which my young semazen friend whirled. There were several excellent musicians.

April 10: was honored and blessed to be invited to lunch with Chelebi Efendi. When the Call to Prayer sounded, he said we should hurry up and finish our meal. Then he asked me if I wanted tea, but I politely declined in order not to take up more time. He then went and got some tea, and I did the same. We arrived at the mosque just as the congregational noon [zuhr] ritual prayer ended, so we prayed it on our own inside the mosque. Then I visited Mevlevi Shaykh Shafeeq Jaan again, and prayed next to him as before, putting my white Muslim cap on just as he did.

April 11: was driven to a little town on the European side of the Bosphorus, where I did the noon [zuhr] congregational prayer with a man whose brother is a major supporter of the Mevlevi of Istanbul. Later that day, did the sunset [maghrib] prayer with this man and the Mevlevi imam in a room located between his office and the main mosque prayer hall. The imam recited long prayer- invocations [du'a] in Arabic.

April 12: was invited to breakfast at the mosque complex with the Mevlevi imam. Then visited Mevlevi Shaykh Shafeeq Jaan for the last time, and prayed with him as before. After coming back, was driven to the Suleymaniye mosque by the man who drove me along the Bosphorus the day before. We waited for the late evening [ishaa] congregational prayer. Later, I returned to where I was staying and packed my bags before being taken to the airport.

Conclusion

The Mevlevi order of sufism has always been an Islamic mystical tradition. Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi's poetry is filled with quotations, paraphrases, and references to the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions [Ahaadiith] of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). See ["Rumi and Islam,"](#) published 2/04.

The Islamic basis of the Mevlevi tradition has been obscured in the West, largely due to the influence of popular non-Islamic sufi groups which are enthusiastic about Rumi as a mystical poet but are uncomfortable with, and prefer to minimize, his association with Islam, a very misunderstood religion in the West.

A visit to the Mevlevi of Istanbul, however, shows that the Islamic foundations of the Mevlevi tradition are very strong there, even though it's a very cosmopolitan and Westernized city. They are Muslims who are wonderfully tolerant, loving, and generous--and not at all fanatical or "fundamentalist." They are heirs to the great Mevlevi mystical wisdom that tradition derived from one of the greatest Muslim saints and followers of the Prophet Muhammad--Hazrat-i Mawlawi Jalaluddin Muhammad Balkhi-yi Rumi--may God sanctify his spirit.

-Ibrahim Gamard, 4/17/04