The academic boycott vs. the truth of Islamic education in Israel

By Stephen Schwartz

Baghd al-Gharghory, Israel—A high-level academic conference on Sufism was remarkable for the range of participants. Jews and Muslims who study and teach in the country's institutions would subsidize an Arabic-language program that "seeks to make Arabic compatible with the needs of sciences, literature and arts...[and] recent developments in contemporary culture and modern life." The means to realize this project include publication of a new dictionary of contemporary Arabic, production of an encyclopedia of modern Palestinian literature, and publication of an academic journal Al-Majmaa ("Collection"), with articles in Arabic and English.

Al-Qasemi's first academic conference on Sufism was remarkable for the range of participants. Jews and Muslims who study and teach in the country's "Jewish" universities—the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (HUJ), Bar-Ilan University, the University of Haifa—were joined by Westerners of Christian background who would subsidize an Arabic-language program that "seeks to make Arabic compatible with the needs of sciences, literature and arts...[and] recent developments in contemporary culture and modern life." The means to realize this project include publication of a new dictionary of contemporary Arabic, production of an encyclopedia of modern Palestinian literature, and publication of an academic journal Al-Majmaa ("Collection"), with articles in Arabic and English.

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Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti, who fiercely opposed the Wahhabi fundamentalists who pillaged Arabia and eventually created the Saudi kingdom. Moreh delivered his paper in Arabic, which he described to me as his “mother tongue.” Moreh, who is unwavering in his commitment to the Jewish state, told me he writes love poetry in Arabic. He has been invited to return to Iraq but has declined. He clearly enjoyed warm respect from his Arab colleagues.

Many of the papers were delivered in English, some in Hebrew, and some in Arabic. Inezhak Weismann, an internationally recognized authority on Sufism and on Syrian Islam, discussed the place of Sufis in “the age of globalization.” Weismann, head of the Jewish-Arab Centre at Haifa University, has become an outstanding authority on Sufism and its system of higher learning. “Boycott” is the first term in a maligned triangle of measures intended to isolate and ostracize the Jewish state—along with “divestment” and “sanctions.” The campaign to delegitimize Israel is nothing new; one may look back at the Islamic conception of “imitatio Dei,” or emulation of God’s attributes, using the Latin phrase as well as Arabic terminology. Khalid Sindawi, who teaches at the Jewish-founded Academic College of Emek Yezreel and at Al-Qasemi, described the impact of Sufi beliefs on Shia Islam. In a video conference, Ammar Badawi, the multi (sharia judge) of Tulkarm on the West Bank, evoked the lyrics of Sheikh Mustafa al-Ibaki al-Sulidiqi, a notable Sufi poet. Daphna Ephrat, of the Open University of Israel, who has written authoritatively on Arab Sufis in the 12th and 13th centuries, delivered in English, some in Hebrew, and some in Arabic. Inezhak Weismann, an internationally recognized authority on Sufism and on Syrian Islam, discussed the place of Sufis in “the age of globalization.” Weismann, head of the Jewish-Arab Centre at Haifa University, has become an outstanding authority on Sufism and its system of higher learning. “Boycott” is the first term in a maligned triangle of measures intended to isolate and ostracize the Jewish state—along with “divestment” and “sanctions.” The campaign to delegitimize Israel is nothing new; one may look back at the Islamic conception of “imitatio Dei,” or emulation of God’s attributes, using the Latin phrase as well as Arabic terminology. Khalid Sindawi, who teaches at the Jewish-founded Academic College of Emek Yezreel and at Al-Qasemi, described the impact of Sufi beliefs on Shia Islam. In a video conference, Ammar Badawi, the multi (sharia judge) of Tulkarm on the West Bank, evoked the lyrics of Sheikh Mustafa al-Ibaki al-Sulidiqi, a notable Sufi poet. Daphna Ephrat, of the Open University of Israel, who has written authoritatively on Arab Sufis in the 12th and 13th centuries, presented a paper. I observed to her there are “two Israels”—the real one in which Jews and Arabs work and live alongside each other day by day, and the nightmarish “apartheid” state conjured up in the propaganda of Israel’s enemies. She told me her work on Palestinian Sufism had been denounced in an American academic journal as “Orientalist”—the insult made infamous by the late Edward Said.

In 2008, Vehbi Bajrami, an Albanian American journalist of Muslim background, visited Al-Qasemi and wrote in Illyria, the Albanian-language semiweekly he publishes in New York, that the school was conceived by the Sufis as a means of allowing Israeli Muslims to study their religion without going abroad and receiving “ideas that were deemed inappropriate for the community.” Bajrami was told by Dalis Fadila, a lecturer in English literature at Al-Qasemi, “It is unfortunate that most of the programs for studying Islam in Muslim academic institutions are driven by dogmatic frameworks of thought that would make sense only centuries ago.” Al-Qasemi is nothing like the radical madrasas that proliferate in Muslim lands. With the help of the Israeli authorities, it has become a model Muslim college. It is unique within Israel’s borders today, although the country also has a much smaller Arab Christian institution for higher education, Mar Elias College (also known as the Nazareth Academic Institute, NAI), established in 2002 as a branch of the University of Indianapolis, which is affiliated with the United Methodist Church. In 2009 the Israeli government approved the establishment of Mar Elias College, which must subsist on private donations for five years before it qualifies for state funds. Several other Christian academic institutions operate in Israel, but serve students coming to the Holy Land from abroad.

During the conference, a number of students asked me, rather shifty, if I thought Sufism could bring peace to the Middle East. I answered honestly that I do not know and hesitate to make predictions. In an institution like Al-Qasemi is certainly preferable to a Wahhabi madrasa or an Iranian-backed Shia seminary of the kind found in Lebanon, to say nothing of the corruption of the Palestinian Authority and the terrorism of Hamas and Hezbollah. It remains a powerful reason why boycotts against Israel deserve to fail.