

Mawlid an-Nabi: The Celebration of Prophet Muhammad's (s) Birthday

By Professor Sulayman Nyang, Ph.D.

Muslims in the Western part of the globe are becoming partners in the annual Muslim celebration of the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (s) ibn Abdullah of Arabia. The history of this celebration goes back to the early days of Islam when some of the Tabi`in (the successors of the Companions of the Prophet) began to hold sessions in which poetry and songs composed to honor the dignity and the righteous example of the Messenger of Allah were recited and sung to overflowing crowds in the major cities of Islamic Civilization.

Although this practice has been a bone of contention among Muslim jurists (*fuqaha*) and Muslim scholars and literati (*mutakalimun*) since its inception, Muslim rulers and intellectuals over time have come to accept it as part of the mental and emotional furniture of Muslim society. Among the members of Sufi orders worldwide, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday is not a departure from the mainstream. Rather, they would argue, such practices among believers is a living testimony that Muslims of their times are still faithful to the Qur'anic injunction: "*O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation.*" [33: 56]

Regardless how one may feel about this matter, the fact remains that Mawlid an-Nabi is now listed among the public holidays of nearly every country around the Muslim world. Along with the two Eids, this holiday is now widely celebrated by Muslims of different sectarian and tariqa backgrounds. Why is the Mawlid an-Nabi significant, and what meaning does it have for Muslims who engage in its celebration? It is to these and other related questions and issues that we now turn.

The origin and development of the Birthday Commemoration

Scholars who are familiar with the historical developments of Muslim religious practices have told us that the immediate companions of the Prophet (s) did not necessarily engage in the practice of Mawlid an-Nabi. This, however, does not mean to say that the Holy Prophet (s) forbade his Companions from composing poems in his honor. It should be remembered that during the struggle against the Meccan infidels (*kafirun*), the Meccans assigned poets to compose negative poetry against our Prophet (s). This was in the tradition of the Arabs who valued verbal skills in occasional wars of words. It is indeed against this background that one can understand the development of the various forms of Qasidas composed in the name of the Holy Prophet (s).

However, it must be stated categorically that the Mawlid an-Nabi is more than poetry reading. It is a spiritual and social occasion for the Muslims who are so inclined to celebrate it. It is a memorial day when the Sirah (the life story of the Prophet) is revisited and scholars and singers in the Sufi tradition remind the members of the Ummah about the teachings of the Prophet (s) and the successes and challenges of the young Muslim community in Mecca and Medina.

Most of the poetry and hagiographic literature that developed over the centuries of Islamic history came into being as a result of individual Muslim enthusiasm with the life and times of the Holy Prophet (s). One of the most widely celebrated qasidas about the life and times of the Holy Prophet (s) came from the repertoire commonly known as *The Burda*, by Shaykh al-Busairi. This particular qasida about the life and times of the Prophet (s) inspired countless others in various Muslim languages. Thus, modern day Ibn Batutas who travel around the Muslim World will encounter

countless of these qasidas and songs celebrating the life and times of the Holy Prophet (s) wherever they may land.

Transplantation to the West

Some of the qasidas have come to the attention of Western orientalist and anthropologists studying historical or contemporary Muslim societies. With the rise of globalization, some of these qasidas are now beginning to surface in the Western marketplaces of London, Paris, New York and Milan, where Muslim immigrants have planted new roots.

Joel Millman, in his *Other Americans*, gives us a glimpse of this phenomenon in his portrayal of Senegalese murids of the Qadariyya tariqa known as the muriddiyya of Shaykh Ahmed Bamba. The same can be said about the activities of the members of the Naqshbandiyya order. This group is now planting its seeds throughout the Western World and its adepts commemorate the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (s) on a yearly basis. As a result of this new development, the Mawlid an-Nabi is becoming a part of the mental and emotional furniture of Western Muslims.

Mawlid's Future in the West

Five points need to be made concerning the new phenomenon of the Mawlid in the West.

The first point is that the future of the Mawlid is going to depend heavily on the future of Sufi orders in the West. Given the emerging patterns of conversion (or reversion), Sufism is here to stay. As long as Sufism is around, the Sufi adepts and their organizations will continue to celebrate the birthday of the Holy Prophet (s).

Secondly, we can say that the globalization of the Islamic experience in the West and beyond is going to force more orthodox Muslim groups (such as Salafian, Maududian and Wahhabian groups) who may continue to resist such practices to leave the practitioners of tasawwuf alone. This will not be due to their acts of enlightened self-interest; rather, it will be the result of their greater internalization of the American value of live-and-let-live philosophy. If Catholics and Protestants of various hues and colors have eventually transcended their petty bickerings in Europe after landing on American soil, it is quite conceivable that Muslims in America will eventually arrive at such a *modus vivendi*.

Thirdly, the transplantation of the Mawlid an-Nabi tradition in to the American religious landscape could give rise to new forms of Muslim poetry in the English language. To the best of my knowledge, there is yet to appear any significant body of qasidas in the English language. I am aware of the poetry of Muslim poets such as Abdul Hayy Moore of Philadelphia, PA. His poetry could be part of a growing body of poems and qasidas written in honor and celebration of the Holy Prophet (s). But in saying this, one must not assume that the American Muslim spirit would necessarily follow the Old World pattern of celebration. It is quite conceivable that other art forms will develop among American Muslims of Sufi orientation. This again will depend on whether *taqlid* (imitation) of the old will take precedence over innovation.

Fourthly, while reflecting on the future of the Mawlid celebrations in the West, we must not forget the transforming effects of secularism on Western forms of religious practices. In the name of modernity and practicality, both Catholics and Protestants have made accommodations with the forces of change in the West. Will the New World Sufis degenerate into what I have called elsewhere "popcorn Sufis?" This is to say, the orthodoxy that helps validate the Islamic claims of Sufis could

be sufficiently compromised that the tasawwuf tradition becomes New Age and shallow in content. This tendency should be resisted by all Sufis because otherwise “I told you so” admonitions of the Old World orthodoxy would not only come to haunt them, but they will continue to reverberate in the firmaments of Muslim doctrinal debates.

Last but not least, one can argue that the Mawlid an-Nabi will become interestingly a moral and social bridge linking many diverse Muslim groups who may be light years apart in terms of doctrine but neck to neck in their race to honor and celebrate the birthday of the Prophet (s). This is certainly true of the Sunni celebrant with respect to the Shia, and is equally true of the Naqshbandiyya adept with respect to the Ismaili celebrant of the “Milad a n-Nabi,” whether it be in Chicago, New York, Toronto or Vancouver.