

Was Baha'u'llah a Sufi? Can there be a Bahai sufism? Or are all Bahais Sufi?  
How do Sufi practices relate to the House of Worship and House of Justice?

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To: XX, talisman9@yahoogroups.com  
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- > Is Baha'u'llah, then, allowing Baha'is to be Sufis and call
- > themselves dervishes? Do you think the Universal House of Justice
- > objects to this? Do you think one would have to be born into Sufi
- > culture to be considered a Baha'i Sufi or Baha'i Sufi dervish?

In the world Baha'u'llah grew up in, the main religious institutions were mosques, the shrines of saints, the houses where religious plays were performed, the sufi houses, and the Shaykhi meetings. Men and boys would generally attend all of these (women with some restrictions). Among the Qajar nobility, Sufism was more in fashion than the practices of the mosque. In letters and essays (53-4), Mirza Abu'l-Fadl reports that Baha'u'llah was attending a Sufi meeting led by the Shaykh who advised Shah Muhammad (ie in 1834-48 when Shah Muhammad was on the throne). This would be a meeting of the Ni`matu'llahi order.

Baha'u'llah's relations with the sufis in Sulamaniyyah are discussed by Juan Cole in "Baha'u'llah and the Naqshbandi Sufis in Iraq," in *Studies in Babi and Baha'i History* vol. 2 (Kalimat Press).

If I said Baha'u'llah was a Persian or a Shi`ah, I suppose no-one would object, although one could object: he was a world citizen and a Manifestation. In the same sense, Baha'u'llah was not exactly a Sufi, at least after he became engaged with the Babi community and had other concerns, but he surely was in close contact with Sufis, attended their meetings, read and cited their literature, wrote books for them (7 valleys, 4 valleys), provided prayers and tablets (liturgy) to be used at at least two night-time gatherings, and at one time instructed (or allowed) his followers to dress like Sufis and pass for a group of Sufis with himself as their Shaykh. As in the case of Persian identity and Shi'ism, he was right in there at the heart of Sufi identity, and he then transcended those identities rather than rejecting them.

He was also critical of the weak side of all three identities, of Persian insularity, of the Shiah stress on the unclean-ness and their following ignorant and unworthy ulama, and of the use of "sufism" as an excuse for religious laxity rather than as a path of religious discipline.

Some common (but not required) Sufi practices are forbidden by Baha'u'llah: begging, long unkempt hair, displays of self-mortification, mumbling prayers in the street. Equally striking is that he made his central institution not the mosque, but the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar, the rising-place of dhikr. Moreover he made the recitation of the dhikr (the Greatest Name) a central obligatory practice and the same for everyone. In Islamic Sufism, the dhikr is a freely chosen practice one takes on on becoming a member of a Sufi order, and each Sufi order has its own dhikr or its own way of saying it, so that the dhikr is an identity marker, not a common place.

It seems to me that by putting the Mashriq rather than the mosque at the heart of the community, and making the one form of dhikr obligatory, Baha'u'llah is saying that he wants everyone to become Sufism, but then a sober and humble kind of Sufism. I think as the universal Sufism of the Mashriq'l-Adhkar develops, that will also transcend another feature of Sufism: its identity as something separate to (and implicitly superior to) the "ordinary" religion of the mosque. There is then no excuse for the Sufis to look down their noses at the orthodox, because in Bahai, Sufi has become orthodox. At the same time, I do not think that Baha'u'llah intended that literally everyone should stay up all night for the Sacred Night celebrations (Declaration of the Bab) and the Sidq Ali commemoration. I understand that these are supererogatory rather than obligatory practices. In a Persian letter via a secretary, Shoghi Effendi said that the practices of the Sacred Night are permitted, but not required \*for the present time\* - so the letter allows plenty of room for the UHJ to change this and make the night celebrations obligatory religious practices.

As for what the UHJ makes of the Sufism in the Bahai Faith, I think it came as a bit of a shock at first, but now the recitation of the dhikr has been made obligatory for the Bahais in the West, and the devotional meetings have been recognised as a core activity. Twenty years ago you could a nasty visit from an Assistant for spreading such heretical ideas.

It is natural for institutions that are already established (and this applies to NSAs and LSAs too) to be wary and uncertain when a new institution begins to evolve alongside them. We have seen this in the first reactions to the establishment of the Guardianship, and the extension of the institution of the Counselors downwards to the local level, and the development of institutions of Bahai learning. The first reaction is opposition to the new function, the second is jealousy, the third is to try to take it over and not allow it to naturally develop the structures it needs. As the Bahai community evolves towards its intended organic shape, the elected institutions will eventually learn to live comfortably alongside institutions of religious and secular learning, the House of Worship, the Counselors, Bahai-inspired charitable institutions and so on, appreciating and respecting their different contributions to the whole fabric of the Commonwealth. But I would guess we are about 50 years into a two-century process

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