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**Contemporary Turkish Mevlevi Mysticism.
Organisation, spirituality and relations with secular sphere ***

SOMMARIO: 1. Introduction - 2. The organisational structure of Mevlevi Islamic mysticism - 3. Mevlevi spirituality and religiosity - 4. The secular sphere and the laws of the market - 5. Conclusions.

1 - Introduction

Since the very first theorization of society, social philosophers and scholars of sociology have understood the phenomenon of religion according to a dichotomous vision between the experience of religiosity, irrational and subjective, and the constitution of forms of religious aggregation, in which this experience is rationalised and organised. A distinction was made between closed (static) religion, which the sociologist-anthropologist Bastide called 'domestic' and open (dynamic) or 'sacred savage' religion¹. Since Simmel's work *On the Philosophy of Religion* published in 1912², classical theories have considered religiosity or spirituality as 'a state of the soul', intimate, individual and capable of creating forms of sociability in a spontaneous and non-institutional manner.

Within the social sciences, it has always been problematic to define the concept of religiosity because of its difficult measurement at a social level, in addition to the fact that various disciplinary fields (psychology, theology, sociology, philosophy) have tried to interpret it. Among sociological studies, the one by Glock and Stark³ certainly sets guidelines

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¹ **R. BASTIDE**, *Les problèmes de la vie mystique*, Colin, Paris, 1931.

² **G. SIMMEL**, *Sulla filosofia della religione*, in *Saggi di sociologia della religione*, Borla, Roma, 2000.

³ **C. GLOCK, R. STARK**, *Religion and society in Tension*, MacNally, Chicago Rand, 1965.



for a more sophisticated overall analysis of the 'religious thing' by defining five dimensions that allow us to identify religiosity: belief, practice, knowledge, experience and belonging. Moreover, during the twentieth century, in particular since the nineties, the term spirituality began to indicate new forms of religiosity disconnected from the traditional religions of history (Islam, Christianity, Hebraism). The term indicated new ways and forms of relating to the religious (Pentecostal sects, cyber churches, groups inspired by Eastern religions) through which the individual began to model according to his personal needs (designed spirituality). Spirituality, as understood by Simmel, also takes forms outlined as 'spiritual lifestyles'⁴. Parallel to the development of these, the traditional paths of the intimate and immediate search for the transcendent, such as Jewish and Islamic mysticism (forms of Gnosticism and Hermeticism), have not disappeared. However, they may have modified some aspects of their vitality to be present in the contemporary context.

On the contrary, classical theories from Simmel onwards considered the institution, such as churches and temples, as a cultural product, a distortion or static petrification of the intimate religious experience, which is deprived of its emotional charge⁵. In the relationship with the sacred within traditional religions, the believer must obey norms, believe in dogmas, perform rituals imposed by authorities outside his personal belief. It is precisely the set of visible rituals, the orthopraxis of religion, that has allowed institutions to be more easily studied and defined, for example, based on participation in collective rituals, the frequency of prayer and the mobilisation of financial resources. In his study *Economy and Society* of 1922⁶, Weber proposed an initial definition of churches and sects by classifying them into ideal types, attributing specific morphological, structural and functional characteristics. Based on Weber's reflections, subsequent research was developed, for example, the studies of Troeltsch with his fundamental contribution *The Social Doctrine of the Church and Christian Groups*⁷, which, as we shall see, complexes the ideal types of Weber by adding some characters. These reflections led to read

⁴ G. GIORDAN, *Dalla religione alla spiritualità: una nuova legittimazione del sacro?*, in *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 2004 (35), pp. 105-17.

⁵ G. SIMMEL, *Sulla filosofia della religione*, cit.

⁶ M. WEBER, *Economia e società*, Donzelli, Roma, 1922.

⁷ E. TROELTSCH, *Le dottrine sociali delle chiese e dei gruppi cristiani*, La nuova Italia Editrice, Firenze, 1949.



the socio-religious aggregation as any organisation, whose aims shape its structure and content.

In particular, Beckford⁸ introduces the perspective of the open system for the study of the organisation in which, although this this conception risks to consider only the formal aspects, it modifies the paradigm of the Weber and Troeltsch type understanding the internal internal processes and the influences of the external environment. In *The Heretical Imperative: Contemporary Possibilities of Religious Affirmation*, Berger⁹ observed the essential social role of the organisation as organisation as a space of generational transmission of the deposited memory of the religious experience. Fundamental in making the creed available to future generations, the institution necessarily has a function of regulation, sanctioning and control that loosens the emotional charge of the subject in order to make the experience available to the community¹⁰. This allows for a different vitality of religious perception that sees a shift from the centrality of the individual, with his or her own intimate, meditative and transcendent experience, to that of the group gathered within the 'institutional box', which acquires collective moral strength. Moreover, the forms of organisation are significantly different from one another, as religiosity itself represents different organisational principles of collective life¹¹.

The latter considerations make studies on religious organisations more complex, including the process of structuring. In this regard, in sociological studies from the nineties onwards there has been a progressive interest from the analysis of socio-religious aggregation as an organisation to the analysis of the organisational process from a symbolic-cultural point of view. According to this approach, coming from anthropological studies, the institution represents an organisational culture, a dynamic social environment, able to innovate internally, to preserve itself in the internal social constraint and in constant relation with the external society in its particular context¹². The organisation is, for these

⁸ J. BECKFORD, *Religious Organization. A Trend Report and Bibliography*, in *Current Sociology*, 1973 (21), pp. 7-170.

⁹ P. BERGER, *The heretical imperative*, Anchor Press, New York, 1979.

¹⁰ P. BERGER, *The heretical imperative*, cit.

¹¹ G. GUIZZARDI, E. PACE, *La Chiesa e le altre organizzazioni religiose*, in *Trattato di sociologia del lavoro e dell'organizzazione. Le tipologie*, a cura di D. DE MASI, A. BONZANINI, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 1987.

¹² G. PICCARDO, A. BENOZZO, *Etnografia organizzativa. Una proposta di metodo per l'analisi delle organizzazioni come culture*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano, 1996.



reasons, considered as a fluid social and cultural context produced by the relations between the religious sphere, the sphere of the social bond understood as groups of individuals or social structures in the broad sense, and finally the secular sphere, i.e. the environmental, cultural, economic, legal context¹³.

Considering this multidimensional conception of religious organisations, in the present essay we try to define more clearly the organisation of the Mevlevi Islamic mystical brotherhood and its spirituality in the contemporary Turkish context. Its configuration is not, in our opinion, ascribable to a specific type in the Weber understanding, but consists of an organisational form capable of innovating and preserving itself according to Turkish political, economic and cultural changes. In recent years, scientific literature has been more focused on the study of new spirituality and new spiritual movements, as we have already specified. Moreover, it has taken less account of traditional forms of spirituality as they are probably considered less effective in reading the changes in contemporary society in a phase of democratisation of the sacred, since they are essentially based on stability over the centuries¹⁴. However, even in traditional forms of spirituality, such as Islamic mysticism, one can undoubtedly see elements that allow one to interpret social changes and the way in which they are innovative and preserve their distinctive features and elements.

In the specificity of Turkish Mevlevism, research is particularly scarce and not focused on the comprehensive study of the type of aggregation in its structure, spirituality and relationship with the secular sphere¹⁵, as we propose to do in this essay, since we believe that every aspect of this aggregative form is linked to the other in a dependent way, only in some cases independently. In particular, if we consider the Turkish political context, we discover that it is an exception in the panorama of political-religious history, since it experienced a process of forced

¹³ **R. MARCHISIO**, *Sociologia delle forme religiose. Organizzazioni e culture dalle teorie classiche alle ricerche contemporanee*, Carocci, Roma, 2000.

¹⁴ **G. GIORDAN**, *Dalla religione alla spiritualità*, cit.

¹⁵ **A. BÖTTCHER**, *Mit Turban und Handy. Scheich Nazim al-Qubrusi und sein transnationales Sufinetzwerk*, Ergon, Würzburg, 2011. **B. HENDRICH, D. SARMIS**, *The Message Has to Be Spread: On the Character and Significance of Media in the Dissemination of Sufi Content in the Turkish Republic*, in *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [Online], 2017 (25). Si veda anche **B. HENDRICH**, *Introduction – Beyond State Islam: Religiosity and Spirituality in Contemporary Turkey*, in *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [Online], 2011 (13).



secularisation for a short period, from its foundation in 1922 to about 1950, and then relived progressively a substantial Islamic revivalism promoted by government forces¹⁶, which has brought to the government today a conservative, Islamist party like the AKP of the President of the Republic Recep T. Erdoğan (2014-). Precisely because of this particular form of political Islam, placed between tradition and modernity, the analysis of an ancient form of spirituality such as Mevlevism seems even more attractive to understand how spirituality and its organisational form can be preserved, innovate and can propose new forms of social relationality.

2 - The organisational structure of Mevlevi Islamic mysticism

Of the structure of mystical aggregation, Troeltsch provides a still basic definition for the understanding of its different aspects¹⁷. Differentiating from the church-sect type, widely investigated by his contemporary Weber in *Economics and Society*¹⁸, the mystical type springs from the immediacy of individual experience, as a reaction against the reduction of religiosity to the objectivity of worship and dogma, or as integration of traditional cults¹⁹. Troeltsch, however, highlights some affinities between the sect and the mystical type, first of all, the importance given by both to the primacy of interiority. According to the criterion of the compromise elaborated by himself, the two types of aggregation turn their attention to internal laws, to ethical tension, leaving aside a negotiation with the secular or profane sphere, differently from the church which includes, welcomes and interacts with the outside world. The participation in them by the believer, moreover, based on the criterion of modes of belonging and leadership developed by Weber, is linked to a principle of social exclusivity for which only a narrow élite can take part.

By equating spiritualism with mysticism, Troeltsch sees in them the centrality of religious activity, of subjective experience, of the perceptible religious experience which, it can be noted, recalls the nineteenth-century philosophical concept of *Erlebnis* or lived experience. Although this notion is particularly relevant to the historical (Dilthey²⁰) as well as philosophical

¹⁶ L. NOCERA, *La Turchia contemporanea. Dalla repubblica kemalista al governo AKP*, Carocci, Roma, 2011.

¹⁷ E. TROELTSCH, *Le dottrine sociali*, cit.

¹⁸ M. WEBER, *Economia e società*, cit.

¹⁹ E. TROELTSCH, *Le dottrine sociali*, cit.

²⁰ W. DILTHEY, *Introduzione alle scienze dello spirito*, Bompiani, Milano, 2007.



(Husserl²¹) sphere, it carries within itself a subjectivist, experiential and intimate gnoseological theory at the basis of mysticism, so that knowledge of God and the world of the supernatural can be reached in a spontaneous, direct and individual way. Bearing this last aspect in mind, however, part of sociology has tried to free the category of mysticism from the 'Troeltsch syndrome' of the separation between church and sect by formulating a more appropriate cult/religious order dichotomy to analyse the emerging forms of religiosity²². As in the last approaches on religiousness, we apply for the present study on Islamic mysticism, or otherwise called Sufism, an approach that can analyse functions, organisational structures and its structuring process, without overshadowing external relations (market and religious tourism, public funding).

First of all, the history of the foundation of Mevlevism reveals that from the beginning, around the 13th century, it had spread to the Anatolian area, then the Balkans, where it would dominate the Ottoman court from 1453 to 1922. The founder, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, born in 1207 in Balkh, an ancient Zoroastrian spiritual centre in Afghanistan, moved to the Seljuk capital of Konya on the Anatolian plateau, probably to escape the Mongol invasions, where he died in 1273. Educated by his preacher father in the theological sciences, he lived a life entirely devoted to the search for God from an esoteric point of view. His religious doctrines, which are at the basis of the formation of the order, focused mainly on individual and intimate knowledge of God through particular forms of contemplation and ecstasy. Among these he created the ecstatic dance, called the *sema*, which made him and still makes him famous as the founder of the order of the rotating dervishes²³. The followers immediately became attached to the Seljuk (later Ottoman) military power to legitimise the wars against the Byzantine Empire as religious mentors and preceptors of border warriors²⁴. There is a relationship of support, legitimation between the Islamist political party (AKP) in government and order. Over the centuries until today, the proliferation of Mevlevi groups, with political support, has led to the construction of *tekke*, multifunctional architectural complexes (library, canteen, infirmary, accommodation for wayfarers and those in need, prayer rooms, courtyard, etc.), under the

²¹ E. HUSSERL, *Ricerche logiche*, Il saggiatore, Milano, 2015.

²² W. SWATOS, *Church-set and Cult: Bringing Mysticism Back*, in *Sociological Analysis*, 1981 (42), pp. 17-26.

²³ A. REZA ARASTEH, *Rumi The Persian, The Sufi*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2008.

²⁴ F. LEWIS, *Rumi: Past and Present, East and West; the Life, Teaching and Poetry of Jalāl al-Din Rumi*, Oneworld, Oxford, 2003.



guidance of several spiritual masters all adhering to the word of the founding master Rumi. Among the various spiritual masters there are also women, often instructed by male Mevlevi followers, who surround themselves with female groups interested in learning and following the tradition of the order and who perform ceremonial functions away from men²⁵.

The Persian composed literature left by the founder and his peculiar ecstatic practices allowed, according to a Bergerian perspective²⁶, perspective²⁶, to crystallise and ritualise knowledge in a socio-religious organisational form available to future generations, the confraternity, shaped by a certain vision of religion. This conceives Islam from an esoteric point of view, basically through the reinterpretation of the literary sources of the Islamic tradition, the Koran and the Sunna or Tradition of the facts and sayings of the Prophet Mohammed, to reveal the meanings hidden under the literal surface of the word. This process of research constitutes a true spiritual path or *tarika* (literally 'path' in Arabic) to an intimate knowledge of God, which structures the daily life of mystics in times, practices and social relations²⁷. This way of research is also called the cognitive science of interiority (*'ilm al batin*) thanks to which followers can search and discover metaphorical meanings and belonging to the world of the supernatural in writing, actions and thoughts, left in the sacred texts by God through Muhammad, to reach divine knowledge²⁸. This contrasts, therefore, the legalistic, scripturalistic vision of Islam that has been in the hands of the authorities of religious knowledge, theologians and jurists for centuries, who harness religious belief and expression in canonical, legitimate and orthodox forms. These religious authorities or officials, collectively called *ulema*, constitute the administrative, institutional and spiritual Islamic complex fragmented into mosques, meeting rooms for prayer, spaces used for the study of Koranic law and delegates to social service for the application of the norms in every daily aspect of the believer's life (divorces, transfers of property, etc.)²⁹.

²⁵ A. ALGAR ESEN, *The Dervish's lodge. Architecture, Art and Sufism in Ottoman Empire*, University of California Press, Oxford, 1992.

²⁶ P. BERGER, *The heretical imperative*, cit.

²⁷ E. GEOFFRY, *An introduction to Susfim: The inner path of Islam*, World Wisdom, Bloomington, 2010.

²⁸ E. GEOFFRY, *An introduction to Susfim*, cit.

²⁹ G. VERCELLIN, *Istituzioni del mondo musulmano*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002.



Resuming the analyses of Guizzardi and Pace³⁰, the esoteric vision of religious experience has defined the character of exclusivity, hierarchy and its elitist system over the centuries until today. In truth, the confraternity is not socially exclusive, with its historical welcome and care for the needy masses³¹ as is typically the church, according to Troeltsch's analysis, although it is only interested in participation by a relatively small part of the population because of the type of spiritual journey it requires, more like a sect. It could also be said that the type of path creates a kind of internal sacredness that defines the thresholds of accessibility to the population. In this sense an internal active participation is developed around the confraternity, an external passive participation.

Following a Berger perspective, the pyramidal structure of the organisation reflects the principle of the path of esoteric knowledge in which the adept goes through various phases inherent to his earthly and spiritual life, such as prayer, reading and practices, to gradually prepare himself for divine knowledge, which is only possible for those who are higher in spiritual ascent. The conception of the ascent follows one of the fundamental passages in the history of Mohammed, when he ascended to heaven (*miraç*) on a winged horse, had a vision of hell and heaven, and later came close to God without being able to tolerate the vision since it was inaccessible to the human eye³². There are, therefore, no techniques for recruiting members, but a network of family knowledge and friendship that creates a selection of future mystics. Interest in participating stems from several aspects, first of all social prestige for being part of a spiritual elite, which does not exclude a disenchanted interest in the cognitive experience of God, but is undoubtedly a substantial factor. On the other hand, since there is no Islamic institutional structure, those who acquire power and social relevance are traditionally believers, theologians and jurists, experts of sacred sources, able to read, interpret and recite the words of God, with high education and a religious and spiritual path recognised by the population. Among these doctrines socially respected by the population are also saints, hermits, ascetics and mystics whose choice of life and deep devotion to God are an indicator of spiritual elevation and models of reference to be observed in order to lead an 'islamically' appropriate life.

³⁰ G. GUIZZARDI, E. PACE, *La Chiesa e le altre organizzazioni*, cit.

³¹ B. MCGOWAN, *On mevlevi organization, Osmanlı Araştırmaları*, in *The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, 2012 (40), pp. 295-324.

³² C. GRUBER, F. COLBY, *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'rāj Tales*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2010.



Concerning the *modus operandi*, the followers carry out functions of regulation and organisation of aspects of collective life (order and maintenance of spaces, organisation of meetings and shared meals, management of internal and external educational activities, publicity), while the master of the confraternity plays the role of preserving spiritual power through practices and relationships, his knowledge highlighted during group meetings and practices. To the problem of the transmission of the master's office or charismatic power -a sociological question highlighted by Weber- Mevlevi mysticism responds with the recognition of a chain of transmission of the *baraka*, a beneficial force of divine origin that causes believers to an overabundance in the physical domain and prosperity in the psychic order³³. Upon the death of the master, this sacred force is deposited in part in the burial place or *türbe* (usually a cemetery near the *tekke* or inside a building used for the veneration of the masters), becoming a true pilgrimage destination (even though Orthodox Islam contrasts the worship of saints). In another part, it is transmitted to the disciple closest to the master by spiritual election (in general, a male family member) and thus to the following generations.

In relation to the 'spiritual spatiality' in the places where the charismatic master lived and buried, and to the construction of *tekke*, as mentioned above, one can note a process of visibility and public accessibility that some ascetic-mystical cults do not build. So that for this trait they are closer to the church type according to the Troeltsch typological model or the Swatos one of religious order, based on a choice of adaptability of the organisation towards the world which - we could add - anthropologically searches for a physicality of religious elements or instruments, to increase and spread veneration. In the case of Sunni Orthodox Islam, it also manifests itself to society with the widespread construction of mosques, prayer rooms, legal studies, monumental cemeteries and museums. Another element influencing the institution and its *modus operandi* is the process of secularisation of modernity, understood as the 'progressive loss' of the social significance of the religious³⁴ which, as we will observe for the Turkish context, meets its specificity in the process of exchange and interaction. This has led to the adoption of consumerist strategies linked to the market and religious tourism.

³³ G. VERCELLIN, *Istituzioni*, cit.

³⁴ B. WILSON, *La religione nel mondo contemporaneo*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1966.



3 - Mevlevi spirituality and religiosity

It is possible to identify one of the main characteristics of the Islamic mystical dimension in a very first sociological definition of the 'soul' elaborated by Simmel in his work *On the Philosophy of Religion*, when he describes religiosity as a vital driver of the individual on a par with the artistic and erotic creative charge. The emotional enchantment for the mysterious, the need for absoluteness and self-transcendence characterise in more or less manifest forms any individual in the singularity of his vital experience. With regard to the need for transcendence Berger and Luckmann identify in biological limits, the main factors in the search for a religiousness outside the confines of institutionalised forms. Death, as an absolute biological limit, and related fear is the individual and collective motivations for which complex cultural responses, such as religion, are constructed³⁵.

The essence of Mevlevi mysticism can still be considered as Simmel conceived spirituality, since the intimistic approach is the structuring principle of the whole philosophy underlying the order. However, Mevlevi spirituality could be considered close to the concept of post-secular spirituality, since it can assume for some believers the features of a real spiritual lifestyle. In this kind of life, the individual adapts this religious orientation to his needs and feelings, making it one with the way of living consumption, practices, entertainment and medical care (for example, 'Hollywood food diets', eco-sustainable clothing, alternative medicine)³⁶. This can be part of the social wake of contemporary fascination for esotericism, or rather, for the mystical knowledge of the occult, among the post-secular spiritual dispositions towards the sacred, in oriental philosophies, or mass happenings or the relationship with nature. This contemporary aspect involves the adherents who would obtain and perceive greater social prestige by participating in a type of religious experience for a few adherents or elected members. This is what Hervieu-Legère called the 'elective dimension of religion'³⁷. Furthermore, it could also involve the population outside the order fascinated by worship, especially the international ones who visit the ecstatic dance performances moved by a romantic orientalist vision. Mevlevi mysticism is in fact based on the search for and knowledge of God in an intimate, direct,

³⁵ S. ACQUAVIVA, *Eros, morte ed esperienza religiosa*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 1990.

³⁶ G. GIORDAN, E. PACE, *Introduction: Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World*, in *Religion and the social order*, 2012 (22), pp. 1-7.

³⁷ D. HERVIEU-LÉGER, *Religione e memoria*, il Mulino Bologna, 1996.



spontaneous and irrational way through a spiritual path (*tarika*), which provides a progressive liberation from material and physical needs, to make the 'soul' prepared for divine knowledge³⁸. The spiritual dimension of mevlivism is based initially on seven principles or 'life advice' left to successive generations by the founding master Rumi, on which the subjective ethics of the mystics and mystics are still based in contemporary times, so much so that they are displayed in printed form in every order room³⁹. For the Islamic cultural world, from architecture to art, from customs to ritual practices, the number seven has an edifying value in relation mainly to the Koranic text, in which it is cited in association with the number of paradises, the moments of creation, but above all with God in an antonomasia. It is, therefore, symbolically linked to miracles and divine power⁴⁰. The advice composed in a rhythmic poetic formula, probably conceived for straightforward ritual recitation by heart, is thus handed down by the master: be like the river in helping others and for generosity; be like the sun for compassion and pity; be like the night in hiding the faults of others; be like a dead man in fury and nervousness; be like the earth for modesty and humility; be like the sea for tolerance; be as you seem or seem as you are⁴¹. In these principles, we note some elements of a sociological nature with social functions of order and control, such as the management of personal and collective relationships and the ability to control inappropriate, irrational instincts, such as fury and intolerance, which lead the individual to remain chained to his earthly needs, unable to see beyond his own materiality or, in an otherworldly or sacred sphere, to the infinite wisdom of God. In this way, counsels are the basis of the socialisation of the members of the order to lead a life in consonance with a single word, that of the progenitor, regulating relationships to maintain, consequently, internal cohesion and the transfer of one's memory from generation to generation. On the other hand, it is on memory and rootedness in the past that traditional religions are kept alive in the present.

It is, moreover, in the seven principles that the Simmel vital 'soul' is seen in part caged in ethical forms of composure and adaptation of the path of inner knowledge. To the Mevlevi mysticism corresponds,

³⁸ E. GEOFFRY, *An introduction to Sufism*, cit.

³⁹ F. CITLAK, H. BINGUL, *Rumi and His sufi Path of Love*, Tughra Editions, New Jersey, 2009.

⁴⁰ A. SCHIMMEL, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, University of North Caroline Press, Chapell Hill, 1975.

⁴¹ F. CITLAK, H. BINGUL, *Rumi and His sufi*, cit.



therefore, an order, a rule, a practice to which spirituality must adapt in order to evolve along the way. It is not only a pure inner exercise of the 'soul' but also has implications for conduct and the relational sphere. This is in fact linked to the analysis of Hadot⁴², as well as Foucault⁴³, for which physical and inner/meditative exercises, born in the ancients as a way of knowing the inner self and caring for oneself and one's body, led man over the centuries to impose moral rigidity, creating the moral subject, which had implications on sexuality and chastity, on asceticism, on the practices of containing the body and the 'soul'. In this sense, daily practices aimed at reuniting with oneself, with one's inner self, construct the morality of the subject, of the mystic in this case.

This reflection of a philosophical nature also reaches a sociological level from the moment in which the complexity of individual religious experience can be transferred to a macro-organisational level of religious structures which, we could say, partially undermines the Simmel conception of mysticism as pure spirituality. The spiritual mevlevi were conceived primarily to create moments of intimate search for the divine and the sacred through the physicality of religious experience. Through the bodily repetition of specific movements, the emanation of sounds and words, and the simultaneous mental concentration towards God, the body transcends itself by inducing a state of ecstasy⁴⁴. This consists in a bewilderment of the senses (in Arabic *fanā* which means annihilation of self, passing over), in a liberation from the body for a fleeting taste of the knowledge of God. This, however, does not materialise, nor reveal itself to the believer in some form of communication, because the step for knowledge or exchange with the divine was instantaneous, a brief and transitory permanence (*baqā*). It, especially, undeserved for the mystic who will still and never be ready until death⁴⁵. In Sufism body is necessary to contain the fragmented souls of God; it is only the lifeless structure, the sounding board, animated by the divine breath. The yearning for the sacred ensures that practices are repeated in the life of the mevlevi in a constant tension towards union with God and return to the One, of Plato's philosophical origin. In particular, the mysticism takes up the organicistic vision of the neo-platonic Nativism of the One-God (*tawhid* in Arab-

⁴² P. HADOT, *Esercizi spirituali e filosofia antica*. Einaudi, Torino, 1981.

⁴³ M. FOUCAULT, *Tecnologie del sé. Un seminario con Michel Foucault*, a cura di L.H. MARTIN, H. GUTMAN, P.H. HUTTON, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 1992.

⁴⁴ M. I. MACIOTI, *Teoria e tecnica per la pace interiore*, Liguori, Genova, 1983.

⁴⁵ A. WILCOX, *The Dual Mystical Concepts of Fana' and Baqa' in Early Sufism*, in *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2011 (38), pp. 95-118.



Islamic philosophy) fragmented into many souls who will return to the One-God-the source, to the original state.

The best known mevlevi practice is the *sema* (dance of the swirling swirling dervish). It consists of a rotation on oneself turning within the the defined perimeter of a room. During the rotation, the dancer raises his raises his right arm and turns the palm of his hand towards the sky in in order to receive the divine gifts. The left arm, on the other hand, faces faces the ground with the palm of the hand facing downwards in order to order to dispense the gifts received to those present. One of the main requirements is the concentration on one's own body which must perform rhythmic, according to precise timescales, speeding up and slowing down, adaptations to space in order not to hit what is around⁴⁶. Such a state of physical equilibrium can be considered as the manifestation of a psychic and spiritual inner balance which is only possible with harmony between the parts of the individual. This condition can only be achieved through a gradual path consisting of physical and mental experiences in order to free oneself from futile, earthly and vain needs, to achieve a greater degree of rapprochement with the divine⁴⁷.

Related to this is the custom of ablution or ritual *abdest* before any Islamic religious experience. Before entering the sacred space, be it the mosque, a canonical place for collective worship, the house or a sacralised space for ritual, the believer begins to purify himself. Proceeding with a series of passages of water on the various parts of the body usually contaminated by the profane, the individual purifies himself and makes himself worthy of the passage to a state of worship of the divinity. The purification of the body is a reflection of the purification of the mind, which must turn away from thinking not directed towards God in order to focus its attention exclusively on devotion⁴⁸. Without this intention, the religious function would not have its authenticity, and the believer would not gain any merit or *sevap* in carrying it out by the Creator. On the other hand, if God grants man the possibility of obtaining spiritual merits through practices (therefore of being able to reach Paradise on Judgment Day with good deeds), then the believer must perform them according to the divine commandments. These are nevertheless included in a shared social system of rules for the attribution of merits since it is the believers

⁴⁶ T. BARBER, *Four interpretations of Mevlevi Dervish Dance 1920-1922*, in *Dance Chronicle* 1985 (9), pp. 328-55.

⁴⁷ E. ÇIZMECI, *Sufi Ceremonies in Private and Public*, in *Performing Religion in Public*, a cura di C. M. CHAMBERS, S. DU TOIT, J. EDELMAN, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2013.

⁴⁸ E. ÇIZMECI, *Sufi Ceremonies in Private*, cit.



themselves (especially the most educated in Islamic and Koranic matters) who legitimise the lawfulness of action.

This system based on traditional Islamic sources becomes a sort of symbolic exchange of non-material resources between the mystic and God, an understanding of recognition and loyalty, which eschews eschatologically the evil of the world. In this mechanism of attribution of merits and exchange there is also a utilitarian aim of symbolic economies between what the believer can give and what he can receive in his relationship with others and God⁴⁹. Another element that concerns the salvific function, also concerning Islamic canonical practices, is the veneration of Mohammed, as well as of God and Rumi, as a meritorious and therefore salvific act. Being God's chosen one, the prophet is the model of the believer to refer to in actions, thoughts and feelings, even in his mortality. In the Islamic and Mevlevi mystical tradition the beauty of Muhammad is considered as an earthly fragment of God's infinite beauty; therefore the love and admiration that mystics feel towards the prophet correspond to the love for an infinitesimal divine part. Veneration involves not only the spiritual sphere but also every aspect of life in a sort of imitation, like the *Imitatio Christi* of Christian devotion, whose privileged source is the Tradition or Sunna of the sayings and facts of Mohammed⁵⁰.

4 - The secular sphere and the laws of the market

Historically, the Ottoman society living in the plateau and in Anatolian Thrace has never opposed the birth, activism and relations of the mystical brotherhoods with society; on the contrary, the Turkish Kemalist government (1922-1945) determined a clear interruption by decreeing the illegalisation of orders to secularise the public spaces of the country, especially rural areas, where social control was almost non-existent by the government authorities. Nevertheless, it was precisely the particular inaccessibility to these remote geographies of the country that allowed the mystical orders to remain active illegally, so that their restoration in the public sphere after the end of the one-party-kemalist government was quite sudden. Compared to other confraternities, the Mevlevi seats were

⁴⁹ G. HOMANS, *The Human Group*, Routledge, Abington, 1950.

⁵⁰ N. ROBERTS, *Imitatio Christi, Imitatio Muhammadi, Imitatio Dei*, in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 2012 (47), pp. 227-248.



not destroyed or closed by the republican government, but temporarily used as a museum and partly requalified since the 1950s as places of worship.

Already in 1953, the democratic government authorised the first public practice of the *sema*, making it known abroad; more than a religious practice it constituted for the Mevlevi organisers a private cultural event necessarily of the religious nature for reasons of entertainment. However, as Ritter explains in detail⁵¹, the religious dimension was often particularly obvious to the observer. The need for a personal and immediate approach to religion on the part of the Turkish population in the years following the forced secularisation allowed the Mevlevi order to acquire power and control once again over several strata of society. The openness towards participation by those who do not adhere to the practices and the widespread presence of mystical advisors on the private affairs of the believer have, moreover, marked the considerable breadth of the order in Turkey up to now.

With the beginning of multi-party system in the 1950s and the progressive growth in power of the ruling Islamist political parties to date, relations between the Mevlevi brotherhoods and society have strengthened. By politically supporting and legitimising the orders, the Islamist government has been able and still can expand its electoral basin, also reaching geographical areas and population groups typically involved more in local than national administration, participating in a popular Islam accessible and particularly syncretised with local non-Islamic beliefs and customs. The link between the Mevlevi brotherhoods and the military and political power is also historically confirmed, even under the Sultanate of Rum in Konya (1077-1307), whose main purpose was to support the conversion or *cihad* effort against non-Muslims in Anatolia, then later to maintain Ottoman control⁵².

The current government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), whose main spokesperson is the President of the Republic Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2014-), is particularly supportive of promoting the activities of the orders⁵³. The party's interest is part of a wide-ranging ideological framework, defined by scholars as neo-ottomanism, aimed at

⁵¹ H. RITTER, *Die Mevlânafeier in Konya vom 11.-17. Dezember 1960*, in *Oriens*. 1962 (15), pp. 249-70.

⁵² A. PEACOCK, *Sufism and Political Power*, in *Islam, Literature and Society in Mongol Anatolia*, a cura di A. PEACOCK, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2019.

⁵³ F. DONELLI, *Islam e pluralismo. La coabitazione nell'Impero ottomano*, Mondadori, Milano, 2017.



improving any relationship with the entities present in the imperial period, constituting a widespread restoration, or rather, a revivalism of the socio-cultural conditions of the empire, according to this political design, already elaborated in the essay *Strategic Depth*. The international position of Turkey (2001) of the former Prime Minister Davutoğlu, revives a greater dynamism of Turkey on a geopolitical, economic and cultural level in the former Ottoman territories, of which one of the most important places of formulation, elaboration, transmission, conservation and innovation of Islamic culture resides in the confraternities⁵⁴. Under its inclusive character (Troeltsch), Mevlevism is still one of the most influential and numerous contexts of transmission and sharing of Islamic knowledge. Therefore, if today's relations with the political authorities are not conflicting, the Mevlevi order had to face the dynamics of modernity, of its secularising influences (in the sense of a process of loss of the social significance of religion)⁵⁵, especially during the Kemalist period of secularisation and forced turkisation, which in one way or another forced the Brotherhoods to adapt to the market of religious tourism, to virtual communication on the web and to the dynamics of the cultural industry. For these reasons, the orders have diversified into several groups, adhering differently to the needs of modernity and choosing the best way to be part of Mevlevism.

Compared to the number of orders scattered throughout the territory, there are many groups of so-called 'free time members' who attend mystical activities; they are not involved in the internal organisation, but occasionally participate in social and ritual events without making any special commitments⁵⁶. Some adherents choose, instead, to follow the aggregations based exclusively on the teaching of mystical music and *sema*; still, others prefer a more traditional way by accepting as a teacher a member of the Çelebi family, descendant of the founder Rumi. In particular, the latter adopts a specific symbol, the Mevlevi Ring, to distinguish the web pages authorised to represent the authentic Mevlevi tradition⁵⁷, which recognise in Faruk Hemdem Çelebi the thirty-third absolute hereditary master and the twenty-second direct descendant of the founder Rumi.

⁵⁴ F. DONELLI, *Islam e pluralismo*, cit.

⁵⁵ B. WILSON, *La religione*, cit.

⁵⁶ A. BÖTTCHER, *Mit Turban und Handy*, cit.

⁵⁷ B. HENDRICH, *Introduction – Beyond State Islam*, cit.



Within the latter group, a campaign has developed that publicly denounces, through its online newspaper *Semazen*, the organisation of ceremonies by groups of alleged mystics, not registered with the order, in order to make economic profits by celebrating the *sema* on a par with tourist shows. This denunciation does not want to break relations with the non-Muslim part of the population, both local and foreign, nor to decrease the number of public performances of the *sema*, but to try to authenticate their own cultural heritage and dispose of it in a whole way, also from an economic point of view, as a self-financing modality derives from the sale of tickets for the participation in the *sema*, in addition to other sources of economic support derived from private individuals and members of the order. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated by Sultanova and Rancier⁵⁸ that the traditional elements of the ritual are simplified, reduced to the cultural fact, for example omitting the Koranic recitation, finally made more usable according to the tastes of the public, today wide and heterogeneous, more international than local tourism, and from this consumed like any other non-religious cultural product. So the mechanisms of production, promotion and sale of Mevlevi music follow the same bureaucratic procedures and marketing plans as the non-religious cultural industry.

In relation to musical ceremonies such as the seed grows and the methods of diffusion are diversified into broadcasts, studio recordings, paid concerts, information readings, workshops, which must follow the trend of the tourist market by offering performances as a moment of entertainment in places of refreshment, nightclubs, festivals and private parties. Among the various types of entertainment the courses to learn to play mystical music, specifically with the traditional mevlevi instrument called *ney*, are particularly fashionable, confirms, and supported in religious tourism by the government. The spiritual experience sold to the interested parties empties the traditional relationship between master and descendant, based on submission and humility, preconditions for learning on a practical and spiritual-intentional level the symbolic-religious music produced with *ney*. This re-semantisation of cultural practice also provides an opportunity for export and recognition abroad as a Turkish cultural asset before religious experience.

It is possible, therefore, in Turkish communities in foreign countries to consider the ecstatic dance of the *sema*, included in the UNESCO World

⁵⁸ R. SULTANOVA, M. RANCIER, *Turkic Soundscapes: From Shamanic Voices to Hip-Hop*, Routledge, Abington, 2018.



Heritage List in 2008, as a vehicle for recognition, local acceptance of one's own traditional culture, possibly also a means of funding for an interested public. Finally, there is also a flourishing increase in commercial enterprises that improperly use the adherence to the traditional costumes of the confraternity to sell distinct products, not purely religious, including sweets, clothes and jewellery with imprinted images of the *sema*, upholstery and household items.

5 - Conclusions

According to the reflections presented, the Mevlevite order that is currently active in Turkey seems to assume a flexible, dynamic and hybrid organisation. It admits some aspects of the religious order typology (openness towards the outside, public use of places dedicated to worship), other aspects that can be found in the cult type (internal hierarchy, exclusivity), and other aspects of modernity. These aspects are not defined in the religious/cult order dichotomy and strictly concern aspects peculiar to the confraternity. Some elements and characteristics of the traditional structure of the order have remained intact over the centuries until today, in particular, the esoteric and intimate vision of religious experience has defined the character of exclusivity, the rigid hierarchy and its elitist system.

However, the order has also had to confront the changes that the population of believers has experienced, such as mass mediatisation, the triumph of the net and consumerism. The need for the order to preserve itself and be present in modern Turkish society has meant that internal organisation, funding practices and visibility have changed over the course of the 20th century. In particular, members of the order had to adapt to the religious tourism market, virtual communication on the web and the dynamics of the cultural industry, seeking compromises between being visible and 'marketable' and maintaining the spiritual essence of the order. Although this condition is not easy, the order has nevertheless survived contemporary phenomena by finding forms of mediation with mass society.

To cite an example, the order has certified its cultural productions put on sale online to prevent them from losing the authenticity and purity attributed by its members. Somehow the members of the order tried to be present without distorting the spiritual essence. Besides, spectacular practices such as the seed have also been 'saved' from the religious tourism market and from 'fake orders' that try to take advantage of it for



economic benefits. So, as it has been possible to point out, mevlevism in Turkey is not only present but has adapted to the changes in Turkish society, meeting the needs of believers, and at the same time trying to maintain its own 'authenticity'.