Making Money the Sufi Way: The Murabutin Movement

A close consideration of Anthony Wallace’s definition of revitalization movements as “deliberate, conscious, and organized efforts by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (1956:265) indicates that religion need not be part of the revitalization process or, if it is, that the point may not be to revitalize the religion but to revitalize the society through religion. And indeed, many of the world’s contemporary “religious movements” are initiatives to apply religion to the world’s problems and thus make a more satisfying culture—at least for those believers.

One example is the Murabutin movement in Islam, driven by a Sufi order that engages in da’wa or spreading the religion (literally, “issuing a summons” or “inviting”). At the time of Nils Bubant’s description of the order, it was headed by a Scottish convert to Sufism who took the name Abdal-Qadir-as-Sufi, and the goal of the movement is “a return to the gold-based dinar system of the first caliphates of the Arab Peninsula” (2010: 104). Proponents believe that “the return to the gold dinar system will create a total economic, moral, and political upheaval, thus spelling the end for late-modern capitalism” (104) and ushering in a golden age (literally) for global Islam.

Two things are immediately interesting about this revitalization movement. First, although it is inspired by (Sufi) Islam, it actually began in the United Kingdom, where four young English men and women converted to Islam in 1969; the first Murabutin community was established in Norwich in 1976, and by 2006 it claimed 150 members. Second, the subject of the movement—money—may seem particularly secular to Western audiences, but in reality both Christianity and Islam have attitudes and policies toward money. Islam in particular has a relatively articulate stance on banking, for instance prohibiting the payment or collection of interest (riba in Islamic shari’a law); banking and other economic activities
should also be generally shari’a-compliant, which would exclude investment in enterprises that engage in *haram* (forbidden) activities like pork or alcohol. Even more restrictively, shari’a law bans *gharar* or “speculation,” excessively risky investing. Of course, following these strictures would basically disable the existing global finance system, which depends on interest and speculation and is largely amoral about the ventures that businesses engage in.

Accordingly, in Abdal-Qadir’s opinion the formation of a “worldwide Islamic economy” would eliminate “the interest-based and inflation-prone capitalist monetary system,” and the first step would be “to abolish paper money” (111). In its place the Murabutin would insert the early-Islamic gold coin called the dinar. In 1996 Umar Vadillo wrote a short book called *The Return of the Gold Dinar*, urging the revival of “the bimetallic economy of the seventh-century Arab caliphates based on the gold dinar and the silver dirham” (111). The ultimate goal of the movement, writes Bubandt, “is for all trade and savings to be untied from the control of banks, even the banks that claim to be Islamic. The movement is therefore vehemently opposed to the idea of Islamic banking, proposed by some Muslim economists” (112). Vadillo has insisted that the concept of “Islamic bank” is an oxymoron, akin to “Islamic brothel” (112).

To start to bring the new world of Islamic money to light, the Murabutin movement has founded the Islamic Mint and an internet-based version of the currency, the e-dinar. Vadillo “is also the founding president of the World Islamic Trading Organization (WITO), whose task is to supervise the global old dinar economy” (112), and he has recruited influential allies like Malik Ruiz (a Spanish convert) and Abu Bakr Rieger (a German convert), who are both board members of the European Muslim Union.
The Murabutin movement is a revitalization movement in Wallace’s sense of the term, in that it “is working to establish a modern Islamic alternative to Western secular modernity” and economy (112). Vadillo’s writings, Bubant judges, have the tone “of a revolutionary millenarian,” since the return of the dinar “will mark the beginning of a golden era of freedom, justice, and moral rule” (113). Indeed, Bubandt notices the consistency between the return to the older currency and the Islamic notion of the millennium, with its prophesied return of the Mahdi or “Rightly Guided One,” except that the Murabutin millennium “is also earthly”: “the Murabutin dream of a future society in complete unity with God but brought about by direct human planning desecularizes the modern millennium” (113). For the proponents of Murabutin, “It is in money...that social revolution and religious renewal fuse into one moral utopia” (114).

Finally, Bubandt notes, it is fascinating that this intended “Islamic reconquest of the West” actually represents “a global Islamic revolution originating in the West” (109). In fact, “the Murabutin movement places the West squarely at the center of Islam” (109), dissolving any simple binary between “the Islamic world” and “the West.”

References
