

On the Status, Method and Fallout of the Global Spread of Wahhabism

An interview with Professor Sulayman Nyang

DR. NYANG: The second point that you know which I think is very critical – so these are common grounds whether they are Muslims from India, Africa, Pakistan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine – it doesn't matter...

The second point that I think is critical for Muslims in the United States and all over the world is to recognize the fact that in order for them to succeed in doing *da`wah*, and in promoting the word of Allah (swt) and the example of Prophet Muhammad (s) – they have to like each other, otherwise you cannot be impressive. How you going [to] tell a Christian or a Yahudi (Jew) or non-believer that Islam is very full when he can see that you don't like your other Muslim brother. It doesn't make sense. You cannot be effective. The only way you can be effective is to prove to him or her – that listen – I disagree with my brother – just like in your own family you can disagree with your brother or your sister... So it's just a difference of opinion. So this way the person looking at you will say ah ha, this person does not only have a message but he also has an example in himself or herself, and these two points are very critical...

Q: How do one implement this here between the various organizations? Because this is the main issue. We don't disagree with each other on the general level. For example when I sit with Dr. Muzammil Siddiqi or this one or with that one, you see that there is a mutual understanding. When it goes high to the – [person] sitting on [top of] his organization, then the whole idea changes.

DR. NYANG: You see, **this is where the structures work against unity. Because the structures are institutionalization of narrow interests, you see, and then you see this is where the external forces become dangerous** and this is what I keep telling the Muslims in America - if the Muslims are genuinely interested in planting the seeds of Islam in America they should not allow themselves to be controlled by the forces outside them. Like what you are saying... people will do things Islamically if it advances their interest. What does Islam do for me instead of what can I do for Islam? That's where we started the conversation. **The external forces, sometimes governments, sometimes international Muslim organizations abroad – they feel that they can manipulate groups...**

Q: They have such bad ideas about *Tasawwuf* [Sufism]; ... they brainwash them ... that *Tasawwuf* is *shirk* (associating partners with Allah), so anyone that has a Sufi background – they come against him without trying to know why ...because they learned that *Tasawwuf* is not existing in Islam, which is incorrect. So that's what ...many Muslims are facing in the United States. **But in our countries if you say that you are of this Tariqa [spiritual path] or that Tariqa, they will be happy!**

On Wahhabization of the Islamic movement

DR. NYANG: Yeah, now you see what is happening– if you look at the intellectual history, the social history of the Muslim organizations in America, you can see the reason why this is the case. And again it's because many of these people – if you take the MSA, which we started when we just came here. It started in '64. I came maybe one year later after they started [with] Ahmad Sakr, and all the others.

You have three elements who were instrumental in bringing about the MSA. You have those people from the subcontinent who were followers of **Mawlana Maududi**. Anis Ahmad and all those people – Iqbal Yunus, and all those people. Then you have people who came from the Arab world who would identify with the **Ikhwan al-Muslimoon** [Muslim Brotherhood]. You know, Abu Gideri, Tijani. We're neighbors, you can name their names. And then those who came from Iran, who were the followers of **Ayatollah Khomeini**, people like Mosadeq; [or the one] who became foreign minister after the [Iranian Islamic] Revolution - people like Ibrahim Yazdi. Those elements, they were students here. **These groups, the followers of Ayatollah Khomeini, those from Najaf in Iraq; the followers of Mawlana Maududi; and the followers of Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and the Ikhwan [al-Muslimoon] – they were the ones who started the MSA in America.**

Many of those people, they have a version of Islam – even though Maududi himself has some Tasawwuf connections, but they became very rigid in terms of their Islam, and to some extent many of them had to deal with the Salafi people. So they turned against Tasawwuf.

...If one is to really write an article about American Muslims' resistance to *Tasawwuf*, you have to trace the roots back to this. And then you see what happened is – because of the politics in Arab world, at the time these people were coming in, those people who were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini – they were opposed to the Ba`ath Party in Iraq and Syria. So naturally those kids, our generation, they were older, I was the young... Many of those ...so the Ba`athists were opposed by these Muslims, because in the 50's and 60's most of the Arab kids I went to school with in America were secular.... **They were Muslims, but Islam was not seen as progressive, because they were all Arab nationalists – [saying,] “Nasser, Nasser, Nasser. “ That was the other thing.**

So the Ikhwan people were very marginalized among the Arab intellectual groups. And those people who were followers of Ayatollah Khomeini from Iraq and Iran, they were also marginalized, because these were young Arab, Iranian, Pakistani, Indian Muslims who were Islamic. We used to pray – there are a lot of people I know, now many of them are active, **but when we were students, many of them from Africa, and many from Pakistan – they didn't want to pray.** Many of them now, they are very active. And...their kids are now going to college. In those days they were just what I called “grasshopper” Muslims.

I want to say why *Tasawwuf* was rejected: most of those [Muslims] were secular...and...they came back to Islam after the Iranian Revolution. Many of them, they have kids, they're now professionals in America. **They moved from secularism into Islam. And the kind of Islam they know is ISNA. And the other thing – they come back from being grasshoppers to being 'regular' Muslims.**

Two things have taken place – in the Arab world, in the Muslim world. You have the Iranian Revolution – many of them were now beginning to be attacked by the non-Muslims for being

Muslims. So even if you are a secularized Muslim, you are still attacked. And the Iranians learned the hard way. **Even if you are a secular Iranian, because you are Iranian you are going to be attacked. So many of them now began to realize their Muslim identity. And this coincided with the oil embargo in the Arab world, and the rise of Saudi Arabia.**

So, you see, because Maududi and the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon people were supported by the Arab Gulf States in Saudi Arabia. That's why you have many of these people who are leaders now in Southern California here – they were living in the Arab world. They were doctors in the Arab world, they made money in Kuwait and in Saudi Arabia... because they fled from Egypt, from Nasser's air forces. They went to Saudi Arabia, they helped King Faisal and King Khalid.

Many of them made money, and then they came to America. They became very active in Islamic work here. Those people now, while they were refugees from Nasser in Saudi Arabia, in Qatar – they became Wahhabis. So if you're really trying to understand the root of these anti-*Tasawwuf* [concepts], you have to [study]... the intellectual history and the social history of the Muslim groups.

So those people who were Maududi supporters, those people who were Ayatollah Khoei supporters, and those people who were supporters of the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon, who became refugees in Saudi Arabia, they became influenced by the Wahhabis. **And when they came to America and they started doing *da'wah* they were getting money from Saudi Arabia. So those people, they opposed *Tasawwuf*. That's the intellectual history of what happened.**

On why American Islamist groups reject traditional Islam

Q: **...This is what MSA [and] those who put MSA together at the beginning [believe] – but now we are seeing more Muslims coming, immigrants ...[who] know their backgrounds. [Is it not correct] that the majority of them practice *Tasawwuf*?**

DR. NYANG: **Yes.**

Q: **And they practice Islamic beliefs like Mawlid an-Nabi (birthday of Prophet Muhammad), like salaam; like praising [the Prophet (s)]; like *na'at* and so on [sending salams on the Prophet, praising him, and reciting beautiful poetry and ballads in praise of him]. If the MSA had that idea at the beginning and [among the] new people [who] are coming – is this [rejection of these an] effect of the old leaders of MSA still influencing the new generation?**

DR. NYANG: **No, no, no. That's why when you say the silent majority – they come from Muslim countries where you have *Tasawwuf* already [established]. So there's a gap between the elites who have been influenced, as I described, and the masses... There's a gap there. Most Muslim countries have been exposed to *Tasawwuf* – that's a fact in our intellectual history. There is not a single Muslim country where Islam went without the *Tasawwuf* people.**

Q: **And that *Tasawwuf* was a blessing that had helped to spread Islam...?**

DR. NYANG: Yes, of course, that's the way it happened all over the Islamic world. Of course, you know, some of our ulema (religious scholars), some of our people now, especially the Salafi and the Wahhabi intellectuals will say, "Well these were distortions of Islam because the march of Muslim traders and scholars who were going to these countries in Malaysia, in Indonesia, in Africa, in Central Asia – they had to deal with the culture, so they compromised with the culture." But I think that's false.

Q: Yeah, because as you see, Ibn Taymiyya has clearly supported *Tasawwuf* ... the correct *Tasawwuf*.

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: Which implements the state of *ihсан*? [*Ihsan* is a state of closeness to Allah Almighty about which the Prophet (s) said, "It is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him, He indeed sees you."]

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: And many of the Sufis, like Abu Yazid al-Bistami, like Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, Sulayman ad-Durrani [are mentioned by] Ibn Taymiyya [in] two volumes [about that] in his *Fatawa*, volumes 10 and 11 on *Tasawwuf*, and the necessity of *Tasawwuf*. **And [Ibn Taymiyya] was a Qadiri himself?**

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: So, if we relate to what you said that the traders who conducted business in Central Asia or the Far East or Subcontinents – for their culture to compromise with the culture of the people there... **we also find in the Islamic tradition that different scholars, like Ibn Taymiyya, [were] Sufi, who now ... are being studied...?**

DR. NYANG: Yes, that's right, that's right.

Q: Even Imam Nawawi was a Sufi. Even Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani [and] Al-Haythami [were] Sufi. As-Subki was a Sufi, Adh-Dhahabi, ... were Sufi.

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: The Four Schools of Islam...

DR. NYANG: The major thinkers, yes. They all have Sufi ancestry.

Q: Dr. Nyang, in your opinion – how we can ... bring unity? Because we don't want clashes between the ummah [Muslims of the world], especially in America...

DR. NYANG: No, no.

On clearing up the false understanding of *Tasawwuf*

Q: How can we clear up the MSA understanding about *Tasawwuf*, that it is not something other than Islam, but it is [part of] Islam?

DR. NYANG: Yes, this is where the dialogue has to be initiated. And I think two processes must take place. One is, there must be dialogue with the elites – not all of them will come. Some of them, they have vested interests. **Because, see, if you are a Muslim in America and you are getting money from Saudi Arabia – I don't expect you to... – you may know the truth but you will not come, because your interest is linked... They're not going to accept that because they feel that if they do it, they will destroy their sources of funding. So those people, you don't dismiss them. You still maintain the door open. Keep the door open, because their circumstances could change, you know what I'm saying. They may fall out with the Saudis or whoever that is,** and because you did not snub them or close the door against them, they may turn around and say, "Well you know brother you are right, what you were saying is correct." **I mean, self interest misguided them.**

It's not that they don't have the intellectual understanding - this is a human being, you know that. I mean if you have a son and he falls in love with a girl, because he sees her and he likes her, and we say, "That's not good for you," he's not going to listen... Because that's his interest. You see what I'm saying. Now, until he has intellectual conversion that what he wants – if he wants to buy a car, you tell him, "Don't buy this car, it's not good for you" – but if he's emotionally attached to that car, you cannot tell him anything. Now, until he is influenced by an intellectual understanding that "this is not good for me", then you see that, "what daddy was saying or my friend was saying was correct"... Your interest blinds you to reality, you cannot see it.

There are people like that, those people who have vested interest in the way the Wahhabi hierarchy in Saudi Arabia doles out money to them. And that's not only in America – it's ...all over the world. You see Rabita people – they give money to them. Those people are not going to accept. Intellectually they know that what you are saying is correct, but they are not going to accept it. You see this in every area, with politics and everything else... Once you know this, you understand their behavior. That's of course, in knowledge, what we call the sociology of knowledge. Because you have higher interests that affects the manner in which human beings respond to knowledge; because of their interests.

The Wahhabi – [and] people who are inspired by the Wahhabi, or influenced by the Wahhabi – will never accept Tasawwuf, even if they are intellectually convinced about the validity and the strength of Tasawwuf because of their material interest. And this is very clear in the United States. So, that dialogue – you don't shut the door, don't close the door to them. You keep the door ajar, and if they want to come and dialogue, fine. If I see you [I say], "salaamu 'alaykum brother, how are you doing?" I will be very nice to you. That's between you and me as a brother Muslim. *Khalas* [finished].

On the causes for the rejection of *Tasawwuf*

Q: Can I ask a question? As you are a professor in these issues, and you have more vision on these subjects, tell us why then this ideology - if they know that it is correct, and *Tasawwuf* has been correct all the time, and we know that now in Saudi Arabia, or in this country especially... the silent majority is *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at* and few are not from *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at* - **why then, since they know this, is there that fear of the word "Tasawwuf"? What is in their heart that they are so irritated when the issue of Tasawwuf comes up?**

DR. NYANG: You know, the thing is this: I was a diplomat in Saudi Arabia in the 70's, twenty-two years ago... **What I observed over there in Saudi Arabia, is the fact that the Saudi ruling family itself is not united on this issue of Wahhabism.**

Q: Yes, that is correct. They have nothing to do with it, they don't [even] care for it.

DR. NYANG: Yes, you see what has happened is at one point in time, their father or grandfather, Abdul Aziz, was able to use the Ikhwan, which grew out of the movement created by, you know, like the amir, you know, so-called Saudi Greats, and Muhammad ibn Saud, [and] Abdul Wahhab, Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab. That alliance between the crown and the pen, you know, in Saudi Arabia, has led to the Aali-Shaykh family... You see, and the Al-Saud family. That's why the Aali-Shaykh, you know that very well, Aali-Shaykh family becomes the Minister of Education since the beginning of the kingdom.

On rejection of Wahhabism in its homeland

DR. NYANG: **Now, what has happened really is the royal family may not care about Wahhabism any more.** Because this is one of the reasons why – if you go to Riyadh or Jeddah, you take a taxi, they still listen to music. Whereas Wahhabis used to say, “no music.” [You see] cigars... They put it on TV. If they are Wahhabis, they are opposed to that. In the past, no music in Saudi Arabia. You see, you can see that **even among the royal family, this old idea of Wahhabism, rigid Wahhabism, is fading away.**

OK, the silent majority, the first they are *Ahl Jama'at was-Sunnah*, that's what they are in Saudi Arabia, especially in Hijaz. People they do Mawlid an-Nabi in Medina. [They celebrate the Prophet's birthday, listen to music, smoke cigars, all of which is outlawed by Wahhabis.]

Q: In Medina and Makkah?

DR. NYANG: **Yes!**

Q: Jeddah, everywhere?

DR. NYANG: They do! So the reality is really that the elites have a vested interest in keeping the facade – **it's all facade** – there is no substance to it in Saudi Arabia. It's facade because, you see, the prestige internationally depends on Wahhabism. **The great irony in Saudi Arabia is that Wahhabism is more important as a tool of foreign policy than as an instrument of internal government policy.** You see what I am saying! This is what is happening. And if we recognize this reality, we will know how to deal with them. You see where there is a political issue – because, you see they would like to use this political issue for international propaganda.

And you have some groups now from overseas who have a vested interest in clinging on to that. You see, because the groups that are in America, if they get money from the Wahhabi's government, they re-enforce the external policy, even though, domestically they didn't have much substance to it. You see what I'm saying? This is where politics comes in, and it has nothing to do with Islam or anything else. It's just mere power and how to get power and keep power.

On Wahabi incitement to violence in Africa

Q: And that's what we see now – I'd like your opinion on another matter, also. **Now we see that in many African countries like Kenya, Senegal, Djibouti, Somalia – they begin big fights and clashes between the Muslims.** ...We are seeing that Muslims are fighting each other there, because the majority there are following *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at* and following *Tasawwuf*, because this is how they grew up. [Is this indeed correct?]

DR. NYANG: That's right.

Q: **And now with this new ideology that's coming in from the Wahhabis – you are finding that this is going... clashes are increasing?**

DR. NYANG: **Yes.**

Q: **We have some – one of our brothers sent me letters, that ...in many masajid (mosques), there have been many killings there for who will be in authority between the Wahhabis or still in the hands of the *Ahl as-Sunnah wal-Jama'at***

DR. NYANG: Yes... I can understand this, you see because you have the so called the Islamic Party of Kenya. What's his name again? You know, Ahmed Bilala. The problem you have, you know, in the Kenyan case, you have in Mombasa, you have many of those people – they call them – Europeans call them **Afro-Arabs**. These are people from Hadramut, you know, who migrated to Africa two hundred years ago, they settled, they intermarried with local people. People of Nazariya... You know, and others... So you have these people in Pimba, in Malindi, and you know, like and in Mombasa area.

Those coastal city-states of Muslims have been there for almost about 800 years. Those families of Muslims, many of them historically came from Oman, or Hadramaut, and some other areas in Yemen. Now, some of them were Shi'a, but most of them were Sunni, *Ahl as-Sunnah*. So they settled in that region.

In recent times what has happened is when the *Rabita* began to fight on behalf of the Saudi family with Nasserites, they were looking for allies in the region. And these groups of people became actively involved. So these Wahhabis had their own people. You see, so those people, they get money. If you are an imam in Mombasa, for example, and the *Rabita* sends you a check - in Africa it's a lot of money. They send them about \$800 a month. It's a lot of money over there. In America it's nothing. Over there it's a lot of money. So, you are on the payroll of *Rabita*. They send you \$800 every month. I mean, it makes you live a middle-class lifestyle in Kenya. So, you are an imam and you know every month you get a check and then you may even be member of the Global Islamic Council of Imams or Mosques.

They have a mosque in Saudi Arabia. Every year you go for this annual meeting of imams from around the world. And you meet there – you meet all the people from Pakistan, from Thailand, from Malaysia. You can then go for *umra* [the lesser pilgrimage to Mecca]. It gives you prestige in your community. Because you see, they say the imam is going to see the Imam of Mecca. That's prestige, you see, it's prestige. The newspaper will say that Imam Ahmed Abdullah will be going to Mecca to attend the Global Council of Masjids (mosques).

Prestige. If we have money, you do it in America, too... If they get an invitation, they come from Kenya, yea I'm going to America to join the Muslims. You see? Prestige for them. That's what's happening! This is what is happening! So those guys, they got caught up in this international network of Wahhabis, so when they come to Kenya, they will fight anybody who talks *Tasawwuf*...

Even though in Saudi Arabia, the royal family is not united on Wahhabism anymore. These people are more holier than thou. Ha ha ha. This is what is happening! Politicization of Islam. And the **creation of the profit motive in sectarianism**. See what I'm saying? It becomes commercial. What you were saying earlier in the conversation. **People will say, "What can I get from this Islam?"** Islam now is good for them, it's modernized. You see what I am saying? This is what is happening...?

On how the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon and Wahabi interests became linked

Q: What is your future vision of Islam in the world, Professor Nyang? **With the power of money and political influence, will ideology overcome the whole world and become the effecting factor on Islamic belief? And will the belief of Muslims through fourteen hundred years be changed slightly toward the new ideology of Muhammad bin Abdul Wahab?**

DR. NYANG: **No, I don't think so. I don't think so. You see, fortunately for Muslims – fortunately, I say this – the Saudis don't have the intellectual ability to do that. If they had the intellectual ability, we'd be in serious trouble. You see, they don't have the same intellectual clout that the Egyptians had under Nasser.** You see, when Nasser... you see, if you look at what happened – in fact, I've been trying to encourage some of my students to write – one of the Egyptians scholars who retired from my department said he might write a book or, he said, will get me a grant – then I can write a book... I would like to get one of the graduate students, you know, to really, to investigate this. Because, you see, I have written some articles about it, but I think it should be investigated thoroughly and a book should be written. And that is – because this will deal with the question that you are raising.

The intellectual impact of what the late Malcolm Kerr, who was killed in Lebanon ...he was the president of American University of Beirut... Malcolm Kerr wrote a book called The Arab Cold War... The royal families like the Wahhabis and King Faisal, King Hussein and all that... then later between the Hashemites and the Nasserites, and then, of course, later on it took a different character between the Saudis – Riyadh and Cairo. Because, you see, because of the tension that was going on between Nasser and his advocacy of radical Arab republicanism on the one hand and the traditional Arab monarchists – that tension between the two forces led to the migration of many Muslim intellectuals from the Ikhwan to the Gulf countries.

You know, in my research, which I wrote a long time ago, I wrote this paper many years ago "Saudi Foreign Policy in Africa," which was published almost 20 years ago now. I mean, the argument I made there – some of the things I'm telling you now, I wrote that long ...ago in that article.

What happened really was when King Saud was fighting – at first, Saud was close to Nasser, but then, because Saud was close to America and Nasser was close to the Soviet Union – the Arabs were split ideologically between the supporters of America and the West

and the supporters of Russia. Nasser became the leader of the republican radicals, and then the Saudi family was supported by America. So, many of the Egyptian intellectuals who were with the Ikhwan al-Muslimoon of Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb migrated to Saudi Arabia. And they are the ones – the intellectuals – that’s why I told you that the Saudis don’t have the intellectual ability – they are the ones who helped the Saudi Arabians to establish what? Rabita.

The Rabita was created only to fight the Egyptians Nasserites. Because you have Tawfiq Awwiyla, you know, who was the head of the Majlis, the Supreme Council on Islamic Affairs in Egypt, which was the strongest weapon used by Nasser to penetrate Africa and Asia. And Nasser gave scholarships to Pakistanis, Malaysians – at that time, Malaysia was not strong as it is today – and they were all going to Egypt, at Al-Azhar University, to study. **And then the Saudis, benefiting from the Egyptian intellectuals, people like Mahmoud Tawfiq... [who] all went to Riyadh and they created the Rabita. And the Egyptians, the Lebanese, and the Syrians and Iraqi intellectuals who were Ikhwanis – they fled to Saudi Arabia. And they’re the ones who created the intellectual infrastructure for the royal family in Saudi Arabia.**

So, you have the Majlis in Egypt and you have the Rabita. And the Rabita would now become a very important instrument for the royal family in Saudi Arabia, not only to fight the Nasserites, but to expand Saudi influence in the Muslim world. Then the Saudis’ businessmen, the Alureesha, Alamoodi, al-Wajhi, al-Suleyman, you know, al-Dilal – all those different families that are in Riyadh and in Jeddah – the Hijazis – they put their money together and they established Jami`at Abdul Aziz University, which was a private university, but then, later on, taken over. Because of the rivalry between the Egyptians and the Saudis, that private university became... It’s been widely written about. So when you talk about how Wahabi thought became dominant, this Saudi influence – they didn’t have intellectual know-how.

You see, there are a lot of Saudis now who are educated – many of them are my students. They come to my classes. I have trained many Saudis. They went back now to Saudi Arabia. Some of them are big. But this is the problem. They don’t have the intellectual ability. If they had they had the intellectual ability of the Syrians, or the Egyptians, or the Lebanese, or to a certain extent the Tunisians or Moroccans, maybe they would be able to influence the world. But the Saudis don’t have that.

On Bilal Philips

Q: Don’t you think through Rabita and through scholarships that they are giving in thousands and thousands and they are teaching the people in Medina and Mecca and Riyadh, and these people return to their countries as Bilal Phillips did, or ...?

DR. NYANG: Hah! Bilal Phillips and all those guys!

Q: Because I hear ...people in Sri Lanka ... have big problems there because Bilal Phillips was there and many others from Saudi Arabia were there, and beginning to make...

DR. NYANG: Attack.

Q: Attack the whole belief [system] of Sri Lankan Muslims, because of their belief in *Tasawwuf*?

DR. NYANG: Yes.

Q: And then they are bringing now this new issue about the Muslims and they are supporting the government, so the government gave them the authority to run masajids [mosques]?

DR. NYANG: Ah! Now you're talking. This is the politicization. This is what's happening. This is what is happening. You see, now, you see this is the thing. This is why we have to analyze these things and you understand the political forces at work. Then you have a global understanding. See, what has to happen, really, is that the people, you know, who are committed to *Tasawwuf* have to recognize – they have to do this analysis. What we are doing now, they have to do it systematically, so they have a very solid intellectual understanding of what is on the ground, you see?

Now... **Bilal Philips, of course, you know, he left Saudi Arabia. He was there – he was with Dar al-Ifita. You know, Shaykh Bin Baz. He was a protégé of Shaykh Bin Baz. And Shaykh Bin Baz gave him thousands... hundreds of thousands of dollars from them...** He's a very young man, you know, like he went there and you know, ostensibly to study Arabic, and he did study Arabic very well. You have Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh and – so he became a protégé of Shaykh Bin Baz. **Bin Baz has a lot of money so he gave him a lot of money, you know.**

When they had those problems with so-called “Islamic fundamentalists” in Saudi Arabia – that was when the secular forces – because in Saudi Arabia you have a strong group of people who were – they call them the Southern California Mafia. These are Saudi Arabians who are secular nationalists, and they are still here in America. And they went back home – they're not interested in *Tasawwuf*, they're not interested in Wahhabism – they're interested in Saudi nationalism. Many of them were Ba`athists or Nasserites, and these guys – they saw people like Bilal Philips as troublemakers, because they are encouraging the radicals. That's why they kicked him out – so he went to Dubai. That's why he went to Dubai, and that's why he ended up in the Philippines – even married to a Filipino girl...

The thing is this, you see, the people who were Ahl at-*Tasawwuf*... must have an intellectual understanding of what is happening. Like we are doing now – what's happening globally. And then you develop strategies.

You see, in Sri Lanka, you're right... with the Saudis. Because those people who are locals – they have their personal interests, what can Islam do for me in Sri Lanka? So those imams, those khatibs, and all those people in the masajids who have vested interests – they know that they may be outnumbered locally by the people who follow *Tasawwuf*, but they could use their government, where the government in Sri Lanka is now faced with a problem. You know, they have a problem with the... in Jafna and all those places in Sri Lanka. So what they try to do now is that – the Muslims are the middle group. The Sinhalese and the Tamil fight.

The Muslims, they cut both groups. You have some Muslims who are Sinhalese, some who are Tamils. So the Muslims are the brokers between the two groups. So the leadership, who are mainly Sinhalese anyway in Sri Lanka – they would like the Muslims to be on their side. **And if that is the**

case, the Muslims who are now struggling for power among themselves – those who are opposed to the Sufis, they try to get the Saudis to bring money to the Sri Lankans. That's the game that they're playing! So you see, if I want to win against the Sufis in Sri Lanka, I'd form two alliances. I'd form an alliance with the Wahhabis, and I'd form an alliance with the government. **And I'd tell my Wahhabi friends, "Send money to these guys, because they are fighting the war against the Tamils."** You see what I'm saying? And this way they benefit. This is what's happening.

So what has to happen really – they will not succeed. Because you know the Arab intellectual history. In the early part of Islam, when the Mu'tazila became dominant – the Khalifa tried to use state power to repress all the other groups. Is that true? But they did not succeed. They lost out. You see, they lost out. The disciples of Imam al-Ash`ari eventually won. The same thing is going to happen. Don't worry about them.

On correcting the Muslims understanding of doctrine

DR. NYANG: The most important thing is to build structures. That's why America becomes a very important theatre here. What has to happen here is the people who are interested in really promoting Islam and away from these government structures that have narrow blinders, you plant the seeds here among the young people. Get people like Shihab, Muhammad Zain and others. Get the... Pass it around. Give them the information.

Q: How do you give them the information?

DR. NYANG: Well, books like this is one [Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine]. And then you organize seminars. And then you begin to create catalysts – you have regional seminars, you have annual seminars, conference – annual conference, regional seminars – East Coast, West Coast, southern part like Florida. And then you also begin to create catalysts for *da'wah* and reinforcement. Then you have dialogue. Because you see, in order for the Muslim groups that are genuinely interested in promoting Islam – they have to do *da'wah* and dialogue. But these are two different strategies.

Da'wah is to teach those people who are within the community more about Islam, and to make sure that the division which is incurred is minimized. And at the same time to educate non-Muslims about Islam... Not every Muslim can dialogue with Nassaranis or Yahudis, no. You have to be secure. See, I feel adequate to dialogue with Christians, because if I sit down with Christians, I may know more about Christianity than they do. Because I have read their classical works. I know what their scholars have said. So when I sit down with them, I talk to them, and I tell them what their scholars have said. And I tell them what we Muslims believe in, and what our scholars have said, and then we'll dialogue. Let's talk, let's find common ground. It's because we live in America here. You will need to educate them.

So they will go and they say, "Wow, now we have" – you know, if you are dialoguing with them, they say, "Yeah, ... He's secure as a Muslim, but he's willing to dialogue with us." Those people now you make them your emissaries. Because when they go and they talk with their own people, they will be ambassadors there. Because the ideas you leave with them, they will talk. But if you just put your stuff out like Muslims who are in their cocoon... these are *kuffars* [unbelievers]. What kind of message is that? If you don't like *kuffar* why are you here? Go back to your Muslim world!

People like Saddam Hussein are no good? Ha ha ha. I go every week to Muslims – every week I am speaking to Muslims. Last weekend this time, I was in Dayton, Ohio, and in Youngstown, Ohio.

Q: One question ... how far did you, here and there what you have discussed with other groups, **but have these subjects about *Tasawwuf* and so on, have they been discussed or questioned...?**

DR. NYANG: The only – in fact that’s why I wrote an article one time – the ISNA people published one, because I write a lot of things and I give them. Omar Abdullah, who is the editor of the Horizon, he lives in Virginia there – when they called me, Khalid Griggs from The Message people in New York – they call me once in a while – when they want articles they call you. I just look up some of the things I have and I send it to them, and then they can publish what they want.

But the question of *Tasawwuf* has not come up in the way we are discussing. It always comes in the context of – they don’t deal with genuine *Tasawwuf* – they deal with what I call “distorted *Tasawwuf*” - you know, what I call “popcorn Sufis” ... I coined this term 15 years ago. Because there’s a white American lady who is the head of a museum in Washington, D.C., and her sister called her one day – that’s how the name ‘popcorn Sufi’ came up. And she had a sister somewhere in the Western part of the United States here, I think in Oregon or Washington state or somewhere else, and she called her sister and said, “Guess what, guess what”. Her sister said, “Guess what, what’s happening?” ... [they have a group] holding hands and saying “Allah, Allah, Allah”, and she’s not a Muslim – then she must be a ‘popcorn Sufi’.

So you see, that trivialization of *Tasawwuf* has become the major instrument they use against the Muslims, I mean against Muslims who are with *Tasawwuf*. Because this is the kind of *Tasawwuf* ... they see in the United States. People who are followers of these different groups. And in California, there are many of them. If you go to the library, you look at the Encyclopedia of Religion in the United States and you look under Islam or Sufism, you look at the index – you will see these different groups. You know, they have these different groups. So this is where the problem is – you have these different who don’t really – like the Ibn al-Arabi Society, they may have their own journal...Sufis of the West and all these different groups...

Now what has to happen, and this is where it has to be done, without being divisive – I think what has to be done very clearly, ... **You have to come out and say very clearly, we believe in *Tasawwuf* and we maintain our commitment to *Tasawwuf* in light of our commitment to ‘aqida of the Prophet (s), the Sunnah – we belong to *Ahl as-Sunnah* – you come out, and in a very conscious way separate yourself from ‘popcorn Sufis’.** This way you solve the problem. They have to deal with you now intellectually – they cannot just marginalize you and put you there, because they now know that you are not a ‘popcorn Sufi’.... So intellectually now you force them to be honest.

On Islamic acceptability of *Tasawwuf* and Mawlid

Q: **Professor Sulayman Nyang, do you think that *Tasawwuf* is correct Islamically?**

DR. NYANG: **Well, yes – there are various references in the Qur’an which suggest that you have the mystical dimension of Islam. I mean, you know, we can see that very clearly. You know, when the people who are Salafi or Wahhabi reinterpret *nafs ul-ammara bi su*, *nafs ul-lawwamma*, *nafs ul-mutma’inya*, they may interpret these concepts in their own relative**

manner – but they cannot deny the fact that these are stages in the spiritual evolution of *insan* [humankind]. They cannot deny that.

And of course there are many other verses one can quote from the which suggest that there is that mystical understanding which is critical in the development of spiritual enlightenment and the elevation of the human being. You see that very clearly.

In our intellectual tradition – Imam al-Ghazali is a classical example of someone who was well-grounded in terms of the intellectual currents of his time. But he was able to do what I just recommended. He was able to say, “OK listen, I don’t support some of these groups who are going one way.” And these people, you know, their intellectual practices deviate from our *‘aqida* and the central beliefs we have. Now these other groups – I do not agree with them... That has to happen. That’s why I’m saying that this book [Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine] here will be part of that intellectual debate.

Q: Insha’llah (God Willing). It has many references...

DR. NYANG: **Yes. What we have to discourage really is – and this is where as a minority we cannot afford it – we must reduce polemics in our community. You see, I can disagree with my brother, without going [to extremes]... Well, they call me Sufi! So I mean, you know, ... these people call me Sufi anyway.**

Q: **[Can you] say Sulayman Nyang accepts celebration of Milad an-Nabi (s)?**

DR. NYANG: **Well, I gave lectures to the Agha Khan people, celebrating Milad... So I would not have been there if I didn’t. So I mean the Agha Khan people will invite me to go and speak to them on Milad an-Nabi (S).** And you know, interestingly enough, let me make just this point here – when I spoke in Toronto, lot of the Muslims who would **not** normally go to Agha Khan gatherings – hundreds of them, they came. They came! Many of the Muslims from Pakistan, because they know me, they know what I have written over the years, and they came.....

But at least intellectually, I think they respect my opinion, to the point that many of these Pakistanis and Indian Muslims and Bangladeshis who knew my writings and who knew me personally, because I have spoken in their masajids in Canada before, you know, long before I was invited by the Agha Khan followers, the Isma’ilis in Toronto – so they came. **And the Isma’ilis were very happy the other Muslims came to attend the event for the first time. So I mean, you know like, you have thousands – the whole place was packed. Over two thousand people – the whole convention place was packed full. You know, they had all their people, and I came, I spoke to them.** Because the point is – my concern is they wanted me to talk on Islamic civilization. And of course the Agha Khan is very interested in architecture, and he has an award now – the “Agha Khan Award for Architecture”. The best building that resembles the classical Islamic architecture constructed in any country, based on the reports of the judges, will be given an award. And they may get hundreds of thousands of dollars for that. That’s one of his contributions. And notice that King Fahd has also created one like that now...

So I mean, this is the thing. They have done this, I mean the way I see it – the way I see myself intellectually – I want to be in a position to explain to Muslims their intellectual state of affairs. **And I want to be a good ambassador of the Muslims to non-Muslims.** So that when I meet Hindus, even the worst Hindu that doesn’t like us – when he meets me, he will walk away and say, **“You know, I don’t like those Muslims, but I now know where they stand intellectually.”**

Ahh, then I have succeeded. I have done *da'wah*, because I have planted a seed in his mind, and with Allah's blessing he could change his mind. This is what we have to do. This is the way I see it. Yeah, that's how I see it.

Q: If we can ask you for some articles...

DR. NYANG: Yeah, of course. I mean I can write whatever I like, you know like, I mean, you know, like in the areas that I am competent I will write articles.

Q: We are launching a new magazine...The Muslim Magazine – Al-Muslimoon. The Board of the Advisory Committee are very well known people from here, overseas...

DR. NYANG: Overseas, that's good.

Q: From al-Azhar, from Malaysia, Singapore, Pakistan, Turkey, from here – and we are launching the first issue insha-Allah...