Session 1

Scenes from the Religious Frontiers of Timurid Central Asia:
Stories of Conversion in the Life of Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī

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The accounts of conversion presented here are all drawn from a single Persian hagiographical work written in the 15th century in Mawarrannahr, referred to (because of its structure, in eight sections) as the Ḥashiḥ ḥadīqa; the work is focused on a saint known as Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī, and was compiled by one of his disciples. The work survives in two known manuscript copies, one in Tashkent and one in Islamabad. I first discussed this work more than 20 years ago, in a short article, and I have occasionally used it in other studies of Sufi currents in Central Asia; it has also been used by at least two other scholars, but it remains poorly studied, given its rich information on the social and religious history of Central Asia during the Mongol and Timurid periods.

The Ḥashiḥ ḥadīqa explicitly identifies Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī as an Uvaysī, that is, a saint trained in spiritual fashion, by the spirit of a deceased saint or prophet, not by a living teacher in a standard mode of Sufi initiatic and instructional transmission. The author is thus quite sensitive to criticism of his master for lacking direct training and initiation by a living master; he outlines the accusations of his rivals that he was thus a fraud, but affirms his spiritual authority not only through the miracles and wonders typical of hagiographies of the era, but also through specific accounts showing the


eponyms of other, more ‘mainstream,’ Sufi communities active in the era of Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī affirming his sanctity (many of them are shown designating Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī as their rightful successors, thus undercutting the later groups—rivals of Sayyid Aḥmad—who claimed their legacies). The author even acknowledges that his master’s status as a descendant of the Prophet was ‘bestowed’ upon him by the famous Sufi, Sayyid Niʻmatullāh Valī, thus including even natural descent among the ‘spiritual’ gifts earned by the saint in ‘Uvaysī’ fashion. Not unexpectedly, prowess in bringing about conversion to Islam, in the context of broad social groups—nomadic Turks, brought into Central Asia in the course of the Mongol conquest of the 13th century—that were still wholly or partly unassimilated to Muslim society, is among the legitimizing strategies employed by the author on behalf of Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī.

In geographical terms, Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī’s life and Sufi career unfolded in the region to the south and east of Samarqand (near the modern border between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), in the latter 14th century and the first half of the 15th; the author tells us that Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī’s ancestors had come to Mawarannahr from “Khiṭāy” (a term most likely referring, in this context, to Eastern Turkistan), in the time of the Chaghatayid ruler Qazān Sulṭān Khān (a son of Yasavur, known as a convert to Islam), in the mid-1340s. Sayyid Aḥmad Bashīrī is shown traveling to Samarqand, and once as far as Tashkent, but for the most part his sphere of activity was quite restricted; nevertheless, the Hasht ḥadīqa pays considerable attention to the many disciples who made up Sayyid Aḥmad’s Sufi circle, who bear a wide range of Turkic and Persian names.