Maḥmūd, ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm

‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (1910–78), a leading Ṣūfī scholar of the 1960s and 70s in Egypt and reformist rector of al-Azhar Mosque University during the period of Sadat’s presidency (1970–81), is credited for his dedication to al-Azhar and for popularising Ṣūfī knowledge through his publications and radio broadcast. His commitment to revitalising Islamic knowledge earned him the honorary title of “the al-Ghazālī of the twentieth century.” Since 1979 his mawlid (annual birthday festival) has been celebrated in al-Salām, his home village in the Nile Delta. This two-day ceremony, which is announced in national newspapers and broadcast by radio and TV stations, has become the government model of a modern mawlid in contrast to the mainstream popular mawlīds which are regarded as the antithesis of public Islam.

‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd belonged to the last generation of Egyptian scholars to receive a comprehensive training as an Azhari student before the university was divided into colleges, but he was also one of the earliest to acquire first-hand experience of Western scholarship. After receiving his ʾālimīyya from al-Azhar University in 1932 (the ʾālimīyya certificate, introduced in 1872, is a unified diploma conferred on students who have completed the required fields of study), he moved to Paris where he obtained his licences in psychology, sociology, and history of religions from the Sorbonne. In 1938 he began his doctoral studies under the supervision of the great French Orientalist Louis Massignon (d. 1962), writing his dissertation on an early Ṣūfī writer and moralist, al-Ḥārith b. Asad al-Muḥāṣibī (d. 243/857).

When ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd returned to Egypt in 1940, al-Azhar University welcomed him with a lectureship in psychology in the College of Arabic Studies. In 1951, he was transferred to the College of the Fundamentals of Religion (usūl al-dīn) to teach philosophy, and he became dean of the College in 1964. He was appointed secretary general of the Islamic Research Academy of al-Azhar (1968), president of al-Azhar University (1970), and Minister of Endowments and al-Azhar Affairs (1971). Among his numerous achievements as Shaykh al-Azhar (April 1973–October 1978) were a draft of an Islamic constitution, the establishment of the College of
Islamic preaching, and the expansion of educational institutions affiliated with al-Azhar. He carried out fund raising activities for spreading “schools for memorizing the Noble Qur'an” (makātib takhfiṣ al-Qurān al-Karīm) as well as Azharite institutions providing elementary to high school education.

While the French doctorate facilitated his prestigious professional career, it also introduced him to the path. His meeting, in 1940, with the French-born Sufi thinker who took Egyptian nationality René Guénon (d. 1951) probably played a role in introducing him to Egyptian circles. In 1960 he encountered his spiritual master, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ al-Qādir (d. 1964), and was initiated into the Qādīya-Shādhiliyya Sūfī order (the Shādhiliyya, founded by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Shādhili, d. 656/1258, is widespread in North Africa and the central Middle East). Most of the approximately one hundred works he wrote after this initiation deal with Sūfī figures venerated among the Shādhilīs. His writings were intended to provide practising Sūfis with the vocabulary and knowledge suitable to defend their spiritual tradition and to promote Sūfism among educated Egyptians outside of Sūfī circles.

‘Abd al-Halim Mahmūd viewed Sūfism as the solution to various problems faced by Muslim societies in modern times. In particular, he sought to convince his audiences that the Sūfī spiritual path had the potential to encourage people to acquire a proper Islamic mode of thought and action. He called the proper “Muslim way of life” manhaj al-ittibā’, “the way of following,” that is, following the Qurān and the prophet Muḥammad as the ultimate Islamic models. He defined Sūfism not as mere intellectual practice but as comprehensive social reform intended to reunite the fragmented umma under the banner of God’s love.

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Studies

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