

Richard Bulliet, Columbia University

“The Rise of the Sufi Brotherhood as a Reform Movement”

Arguing that the rough synchrony between the spread of Sufi brotherhoods and the rise of sectarian tendencies that culminated, after 1519, in the Protestant Reformation stems from common causes in the parallel evolution of Middle Eastern/North African Islam and Latin Christendom, I will try to show how the Sufi brotherhoods embodied some of the key ideas of reformation that have been more often identified with the Christian movements. These include aversion to religious legalism, preference for charismatic guides regardless of formal religious training, preference for religious expression in vernacular languages, active participation of the ‘laity’ in religious activities, etc. These kinds of reform enjoyed great success until the nineteenth century when forces pressing for a return to legalism and an eschewal of emotionalism began to gain sway. The contest between these tendencies continues to the present day.