

“TRUE ISLAM HAS NEVER DISCARDED ANYONE”

----- Shaykh Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (ra)

**The Life, Work, and Trans-national Communities of
Bawa Muhaiyaddeen**

Fall Semester

Prof. Dr. Ibrahim A. Farajaje'



Very few records exist of the early life of Shaykh Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (ra). In the early 1900s, religious pilgrims travelling through the jungles of Sri Lanka encountered him. Some time later, someone invited him to a nearby village and that is where he began his public teaching. Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Jews of all ethnic backgrounds gathered around him to learn from him. A Muslim community that was called an ashram grew up around him.

In 1971, he visited the United States for the first time and soon settled in Philadelphia where he developed a community that is still in existence today. He continued to live both in Sri Lanka and in Philadelphia. The Fellowship that he founded has published more than 20 books by him. To my knowledge, a course has never

been taught anywhere on him, his thought, his anti-oppression message of non-violence and vegetarianism. He is considered by many to be one of the greatest Muslim thinkers and spiritual leaders of our time. He also produced an incredible body of art. He also delved deeply into the arts of embodiment and much of his teaching is permeated with a particular attention to the body.

His community in Philadelphia, much like that in Sri Lanka brought together people of many religious and racial/ethnic backgrounds. The Fellowship was particularly remarkable in that it provided community for many African American Muslims. Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, African American womanist Muslim scholar and activist talks consistently about the impact that Bawa's teaching has had on her on work as an anti-oppression activist in the world. Prof. Dr. Ghazala Anwar also points us to the significance of Bawa's thought and life for people seeking liberation in today's world.

In Bawa's words, "True Islam has never discarded anyone." What were his teachings and how did his community grow out of them? What can we learn today from how he lived Islam as a space of loving encounter for people of all religious identities? We will read his principal works, listen to him teaching, hear him chanting, study his art work. Those who are near the East Coast or able to travel there, will be able to visit his community in Philadelphia and the place of his burial in the Pennsylvania countryside. It has become a pilgrimage site for people from all over the world. We are particularly fortunate to have such an extensive record of his teachings through the books and recordings published by the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship.

COURSE OUTLINE:

- 1. "Cultivating the Heart" : Preparation for the Journey or Is this REAL Islam?**
- 2. "Mind, Desire and the Billboards of the World": Beyond Apparent Binaries**
- 3. "With Every Breath Say: 'LA ILAHA ILL'ALLAHU'**
- 4. The Fast of Ramadan: Restoring the balance of the ecosystem**
- 5. Lailatul-Qadr: The Night of Power and opening of the Inner Heart**
- 6. Angels in the Human Body: Where are they?**
- 7. "Muslim Vegetarians? No way!": We Are What We Eat/ Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Vegetarianism**
- 8. "The Ultimate Peacefulness": Bawa and Non-Violence**

9. "This Doesn't Resemble the Prophet portrayed in the Media": The Prophet of Light, the Rasulallah: Multiple Dimensions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh&hf) in the teachings of Bawa Muhaiyaddeen

10. Hajj: The Inner Journey

11. The Body of the Qur'an: Bawa's embodied Qur'anic exegesis

12. The Art of the Beautiful Names

13. Sufi Yoga?: Breath, dhikr and the Beautiful Names

14. "To Die Before We Die"

15. CONCLUSION

This course will be taught as an on-line course. Students desiring to take this course should have both the desire and the motivation to participate in a style of learning that is different from that of the

classroom. The class will incorporate chat, webcam, email and web creation as core elements of our work together. Students are not required to have any previous background in educational technology, but a willingness to learn and a motivation to experiment are both key to benefiting fully from this class.

In fulfillment of the course requirements, each student is expected a) to engage with the weekly posted web materials (readings, music, art work, etc.); b) post their reflections weekly on the assigned web materials on the class Discussion Board; c) respond to the reflections of another student on the Discussion Board. Instead of there being a "Final Project", each student will maintain a blog (which may also be a videoblog if they so choose) throughout the course of the semester. This blog will provide a space for them to reflect on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen (ra) in relation to situations that they are encountering in their own lives, whether those be classes, ritual practice, anti-oppression work, Islamophobia, personal health, etc.. If the student is already blogging, their pre-existing blog should be expanded to include the above-mentioned reflections. There will also be chats (and possibly conference calls) organized on a schedule decided on by the class. The lecture notes will seek to provide some background for the class materials and eventually raise some pertinent questions. The professor is available by telephone, email, and video-web conversation. There will also be opportunities to participate in Sufi dhikr and in some part of the fast of Ramadan. Again, while fully recognizing that this is not the same experience as sitting in a classroom in Berkeley, it is hoped that those students who are excited by the possibilities of flexibility and accessibility afforded by on-line learning will want to participate in this multi-dimensional class.

While this is still in the planning phases and might not actually be possible, we are hoping that some, if not all, of the students from the class might be able to participate in a pilgrimage to Bawa's community and mazar(burial site) in Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia.

