

Nur Ashki Jerrahi/Sufi Prison Project  
Sufism (Islam)  
Website: [www.nurashkijerrahi.org](http://www.nurashkijerrahi.org)

This profile was researched and written by student Miranda Meadow of Reed College, under the direction of Dr. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri.

The Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order is a group that branched off from the Halveti-Jerrahi Sufi Order in 1995 in order to honor formally shaykhs Muzaffer Ashki al-Jerrahi and Nur al Jerrahi and to base itself more strictly on their teachings. In Portland, very little interest in the Nur Ashki Jerrahi order existed until the Sufi Prison Project began in the late 1990s, and to date almost all of the order's activities revolve around this project.

The man who began the Sufi Prison Project is a former inmate of the Oregon correctional facilities who has kept ties with some of his fellow prisoners to this day. After his release in 1991, he found spiritual guidance lacking in the local prison system. After his own conversion to Islam during his incarceration, he became interested in Sufism. He joined a Sufi order in 1992 and went through the process necessary to have the Department of Corrections approve "Sufism" as a religion that could be taught and practiced in the prisons (see

[http://egov.oregon.gov/DOC/TRANS/religious\\_services/rs\\_handbook02.shtml#SUFISM](http://egov.oregon.gov/DOC/TRANS/religious_services/rs_handbook02.shtml#SUFISM)) . Thus began the Sufi Prison Project.

In 1999, this man discovered that a *shaykha* (a female shaykh) for the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order had performed an initiation into the order for an inmate in Washington State from her home in New York. This long distance initiation, described as a spiritual transmission, was a way for new members to join the order without the actual presence of a shaykh or shaykha. Immediately, the man in charge of the Sufi Prison Project contacted the shaykha with a list of more than fifteen person, all of whom were initiated into the order long-distance.

The two prisons with an interest in Sufism were Oregon State Penitentiary and Eastern Oregon Correctional Institute. Since this first initiation, interest in Sufism has grown steadily in the two prisons. About twenty men attend the meetings, which occur once or twice a month for about two hours at a time. Generally during these meetings the men perform *wird*, a supplication to God, and chant prayers specific to the Nur Ashki Jerrahi order. Once a year the shaykha from New York comes to see the activities of the Sufi Prison Project, to meet with inmates, and perform initiations as needed.

None of the inmates who attend the Sufi meetings are required to be Muslim. In fact, many of them associate themselves with a number of different faiths. However, they are quasi-Islamic in the sense that they acknowledge Sufism as a mystical tradition within Islam and hold that Prophet Muhammad is a messenger of God to whom the Quran was revealed. Some of the prisoners have taken *shahada* (Muslim declaration of faith), but it is uncommon to find prisoners who adhere only to Islamic practices and

principles. Outside of the prisons, the Nur Ashki Jerrahi Order has also attracted a few followers. Ex-convicts, as well as family members of inmates, occasionally have attended *dhikr* (“remembrance”) ceremonies led by the coordinator of the Project. Since the shaykha's visit to Portland from New York in summer of 2004, the group, which currently has around ten members outside of the prison system, is making a more concerted effort to hold weekly *dhikr* ceremonies outside of prisons.

Prepared by Student Researcher  
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