

The Mevlevi Community
Sufism (Islam)
Website: www.sufism.org
www.hayatidede.com

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There are two distinct Mevlevi circles in Portland. One is known as the Mevlevi Order of America, the other as the Threshold Society. Both proclaim themselves practitioners of the teachings of Mevlâna Jalâluddîn Rumi (d. 1273).

The Mevlevi Order of America (www.hayatidede.com)

A man named Suleyman Dede (d. 1985), a shaykh in the Mevlevi Order, headquartered in Konya, Turkey, visited the United States a few times during the 1970s under the auspices of UNESCO (United National Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). He sent his son, Jelaledin Loras, to study in the United States. While in the United States, Jelaledin became acquainted with some American Sufi teachers and began teaching Sufism himself in San Francisco in 1978. In 1983 a man who had met Jelaledin in San Francisco moved to Portland. In Portland he started a Sufi circle founded on the teachings of various Sufi masters he had known. He sponsored Jelaledin's visits to Portland, and introduced him to followers of the Sufi Islamic Ruhaniat Society and the Sufi Order of the West. Through these contacts Jelaledin established a branch of his organization, the Mevlevi Order of America, in Portland.

Activities of the Mevlevi Order of America in Portland

The Mevlevi Order of America does not require its members to be Muslim. There are, however, few Muslims among its members. They do not insist upon adherence to Islam because, according to its members, they have no interest in the "dogmas or politics" of the religion. Instead, they focus more on the immediate steps that they feel bring them spiritual awareness. The Mevlevi have been nicknamed the Whirling Dervishes because of the twirling dance they perform as part of their *dhikr* (remembrance of divine names) ceremonies. The Mevlevi Order of America focuses its spiritual activities on this act of remembrance of divine names while moving or dancing. They meet every Wednesday evening. According to current members of the group, "the sessions involve whirling, some teachings, and a lot of remembrance and chanting." Jelaledin visits Portland a few times a year from his primary residence in Hawaii.

The Threshold Society (www.sufism.org)

The Threshold Society started in 1975 and was formally incorporated in 1986 by Kabir Helminski and his wife Camille Helminski. Kabir began his training as a Mevlevi with Suleyman Dede. In 1990, Kabir was appointed the shaykh of the Mevlevi order in North America by Dr. Celaleddin Celebi, the head of the international Mevlevi order in Turkey. Members of the Threshold Society and the Mevlevi Order of America do not interact

much with one another mainly because of disputes over who should be recognized as the rightful leader of the Mevlevi order in North America. Where as the Mevlevi Order of America recognizes Suleyman Dede's son, Jelaleddin Lora as the next shaykh of the Mevlevi order in North America after his father, the Threshold Society recognizes Suleyman Dede's former pupil, Kabir Helminski.

In the late 1980s, the same man who sponsored Jelaleddin Loras's visit to Portland in the mid-1980s attended a Sufi symposium in San Francisco where he met Kabir Helminski. He was very attracted to Kabir's teachings and reputation. He visited Kabir a second time with a woman from his Portland Sufi circle. This woman later collaborated with Kabir and his wife Camille in order to establish a circle the Threshold Society in Portland.

Activities of the Threshold Society in Portland

The Threshold Society states that it aims to apply traditional Sufi principles to modern life. Similar to the Mevlevi Order of America, they do not require members to accept or practice Islam, but the leaders of the society are themselves Muslim. In its Statement of Purpose the Threshold Society states that membership “entails a willingness to acquaint oneself with and understand the sources and framework of the Sufi tradition, including the Qur’an and the Sayings of the Prophet. It is not, however, required that a Mevlevi dervish embrace the religion of Islam in its outer, sociological form.” The Threshold Society instead demands strict adherence to a moral and ethical way of life, laid out in its Ethics Agreement. Noticeable in the language of this document are references to Allah and recommendations to observe traditional Islamic practices such as praying five times daily and learning correct Arabic pronunciation for prayer recitation.

The local community in Portland has weekly *dhikr* meetings at the home of the Threshold Society contact for Portland. Normally meetings begin with a prayer. Following this is a lesson in the pronunciation and meaning of Sufi technical terms. The Portland contact person for the Threshold Society selects a short text from the teachings of Rumi or Kabir, among others, for discussion. After the discussion, a period of silence for contemplation and quiet remembrance is observed, and the meeting ends with the performance of *dhikr*.

Prepared by Student Researcher
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