

ISLAMIC HERESY

Mohammed died after a short illness at age 62, and the infant community was not prepared. His death came as a shock that almost destroyed it. Personal and tribal rivalries posed such a threat to a choice of his successor that acclaiming one of the number of his closest companions as Khalifah averted disaster.

He only lived two years, and his next two successors were murdered. The last of these four "rightly guided Kalifahs" was Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son in law of Muhammed.

He was never firmly established in power as he was suspected in the murder of the last Kalifah. It is this Ali that the Shiah look to as the rightful ruler.

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SHI'AH AND SUNNI

The Islamic community falls into two great divisions. The Sunni speak of themselves as "the People of established custom and of the (genuine) community. They see themselves as the true bearers of Islam, the traditionalists.

What separates them from the Shi'ah is they believe that a leader should be one who can lead with religious authority, not necessarily the descendent of Muhammed.

For the Shi'ah, (which means party, namely, partisanship of Ali) the leader must be a direct descendent of Muhammed. This idea pre-dates Muhammed's death. Ali was clearly the best qualified (Muhammed had no sons that lived to adulthood).

The political/religious aspirations of the Shi'ah have been frustrated until 1979 with Komeni, a descendent of Muhammed, came

to power in Iran in 1979. It is the "passion motif" that separates the attitude of the shi'ah from the Sunni. Their main holiday is a re-enactment of Ali's son husayn's death at the hands of the Sunni.

In fact, the Shi'ah believe that all of their Imans (leaders), the members of the holy family including the prophet Muhammed himself, have been killed by 'unjust men' usually by poisoning. During the month of Muharram they celebrate the martyrdom of these imans.

It is among the Shi'ah that most of the sects which have been considered "heretical" have arisen. This is because different shi'ah believe different Iman's are still guiding the community from a hidden place. This Iman (usually the seventh or twelfth) will come again at the end of time to establish the kingdom of God.

For more extreme Shi'ah, the iman is considered as virtually an incarnation of God. There is a veritable indwelling of the divine spirit in the iman so that in knowing him one experiences the full reality of the divine presence in the world.

At the other end of Shi'ah opinion, the iman is considered only to be inspired or divinely led, much like the Prophet himself.

Between these two extremes are the great majority of Shi'ah. These believe that a spark of the Eternal divine wisdom was implanted in Muhammed and upon his death was transplanted into Ali and from thence into the series of his descendants whom God has chosen.

For the most part, it is the SEVENER Shi'ah who are the most radical and who have divided into more sects than the more moderate twelver Shi'ah. The Sevensers are sometimes called "Ismal'ilis after the last iman they recognize.

For a great part of Islamic history, the seveners existed as secret societies which, in the effort to pread thier creed among Muslims, engaged in revolutionary activities against established rulers and states. I will discuss their most famous group, the Assassins in the section on Secret societies.

The Seveners gained support with the rise of the Fatima dynasty of Egypt (969-1174) whose rulers reckoned themselves in the line of descent from Muhammed ibn Isma'il, the last Iman of the seveners.

It was one of the most brilliant eras of Islamic history with the founding of modern Cairo, the establishment of the famous Al-Azhar university, and many other feats.

The Seveners have produced numerous sub-groups which continue to flourish at the present time. These include the Druze, who live in the hills of Lebenon, and the Nusayris of Syria. Most famous are the followers of Agha Khan, the majority of whom are found in India and areas around the Indian Ocean.

Since these groups follow an esoteric teaching into which one must be initiated to understand, they are rejected as heretical by the majority of sunni and shi'ah. Their philosophy is basically neo-platonic and gnostic, believing that everything in the external world represents on a small scale the realities of a spiritual and invisible world. It is these I will cover.

RATIONALISM VS. ORTHODOXY

In law, theology, science, philosophy, literature and the humanities, Islam is today virtually what it was 9 centuries ago. Its schools of thought, developed then, have persisted in some form to the present day.

THE MU'TAZILAH were the first Muslim's to develop a theology. They appeared toward the end of the first Islamic century (they date their beginning to 622) and had gained fairly extensive acquaintance with Greek Philosophy.

They were not trying to undercut Islam, but were firm believers in revelation and prophecy and the authority of the prophetic tradition.

They were called "The people of Unity and Justice". By unity, they meant the unity of God, his exclusive sovereignty over the many powers recognized by the pagan Arabs. God's nature was simple and uncompounded (Plato) so they denied any anthropomorphism of God. They applied a rational criteria for assessing the validity of religious doctrines.

On Divine Justice, they applied the same rational approach. They could not accept pre-destination of the majority of their contemporaries as that would impinge on God's justice. Thus, free will with reward and punishment was the only rational approach.

THE QUR'AN - The rationalist wing of the Mu'tazilah accorded the products of human reason an absolute value above the Koran. In 827, a momentous proclamation declaring the dogma of "the

creation of the Qur'an in opposition to the orthodox view that in its actual form, in its Arabic Language, the Qur'an is the identical reproduction of a celestial original, was made by judge, Ibn-abi Duwad.

This new dogma became the touchstone of Muslim belief, and even judges had to pass the test. At the same time as this became law (833) the mihnah, an inquisitorial tribunal for the trial and conviction of those who denied his dogma was set up.

Ironically, there had been executions for heresy before this time, including on man for teaching the Koran was created. And another for promulgating the doctrine of free will (8th cent.)

The orthodox were thus persecuted until 848 when the Mu'taziltes found themselves suddenly the heretics. This was mostly due to AL-ASH'ARI (d. 873) who began as a Mu'tazilah but broke with them, using the authority of the revelation of the prophet rather than of reason to defeat them.

He used their vocabulary and ideas they had developed and became the founder of Scholasitic theology w/in Islam. After him, the attempt to reconçile religious doctrine with Greek thought became the supreme feature of Moslem Intellectual life.

He said that one had to accept the anthropomorphic idea of God because the Qur'an said so. He also held the reality of God's attributes and the vision of God on the last day as reality, both of which the Mu'tazilah denied as contrary to reason.

His doctrine of pre destination grew out of hnis vivid perception of the sovereignty of God which he would not

compromise. "Allah created unbelief of the infidel and damned him for it." However, humans are still responsible for what one does.

This has become the view of the "Orthodox" sunni muslims ever since. However, the Mu'tazalite view has survived through the Shi'ah, who have been much more creative in their theology.

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THE ISMA'ILIYYA

Contrary to the Sunni and Sufi doctrine (which said knowledge of God is only gained thru ecstasy) the Shi'ah maintained that religious certainty could be gained only from the instruction of such an imam divinely protected against error and sin. For the 12ers, the last 9 imams to whom they swore allegiance were descendants of Husayn.

The last imam, the 12th, disappeared into a cave in 878 of the great mosque at Samarra w/o leaving offspring. He became the 'hidden' imam. He is immune from death and in due time will appear as the Mahdi (divinely guided one) to restore true Islam, conquer the whole world and usher in a short millennium before the end of all things.

In Persia, the 12er Shi'ah were established in 1502 by the Safawids, who claimed descent from the 7th imam. The shah has been considered as simply the locum tenens of the hidden imam and the higher theologians as his spokesmen in intermediaries with men. Until 1979, when an imam arrived in Komeni.

Thus did the imam-mahdi dogma become an essential part of Shi'ite creed. Even today it forms the main line of demarcation between shi'ite and sunni Islam. While the Sunnites do look

forward to a future restorer of the faith, they neither emphasize his importance in their eschatology nor call him Mahdi.

The Shi'ah soil was most fertile for the development of heterodoxies. The Seveners agreed with the 12ers down to the sixth imman but here they diverge. Ja'far, the 6th imman, had designated his son Isma'il as his successor, but learning of his intemperance changed his decision in favour of his second son, Musa.

The majority of the Shi'ah acquiesced in the change and continued with Musa as the 7th imman. The minority, however, claimed the the imman is an infallible being could not prejudice his case by such a thing as drinking wine and remained loyal to Isma'il, who predeceased his father by five years. To these seveners, Isma'il became the hidden Mahdi.

In the Isma'iliyah system as in the Pythagorean system, the number seven assumed sacred importance. The seveners divided the cosmos and historical happenings by this number. In their gnostic cosmogony, partly based on Neo-Platonism, the stems of emanation were seven. 1. God;>2. the universal mind;>3. the universal soul;>4. primeval matter;> 5. space; > 6. time;> 7: the world of Earth and humans.

CYCLIC TIME

For the Ismailis, history takes place in cycles. This is a way of valuating time, of symbolizing the way in which meaning penetrates time. They do not emphasize decline, as in the Greek

myth of the age of Gold, silver, bronze and lead. so much as simply change itself.

A cyclic conception of time has no omega points, no ultimate perfections either past or future. Each sub-cycle is "ruled" by a prophet who represents the outward aspect of revelation and a saint, who represents the inner.

Moses, for example, brought the law--Aaron taught its esoteric significance. Jesus spoke in Parables, --John the Baptist (or some other gnostic figure) unveiled their hidden meaning to the elect. Mohammed brought the Qur'an and Sharia, kAli embodied their secret significance.

Orthodox Islam, like all established religions, claims to be the final cycle of revelation. Ishmalies accept Mohammed as the last revelation butr he, and other prophets, have been replaced by the cycle of esoteric interpreters.

For the Ismailis this unfolding of the inner meaning begins with Ali, passes on thru the first six shi'ite imams, than from Ismail, the 7th iman to the Egyptian Fatimid dynasty, who believed their caliphas to be blood descendents of Ali and the Prophet thru Fatima's line (Mohammed's daughter).

Besides which Iman is "hidden", the Ishmalis broke with the more Orthodox Shi'ah over the idea that the Imam must always be a person living in the world; the current incumbent, the Agha Khan, claims blood-descent from the prophet through the Fatimid Caliphs. We will discuss Him more when doing the Assassins which he is the head of since the early 19th century.

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The Isma'ilites organized one of the most subtle and effective means of politico -religious propaganda that the world of Islam ever experienced.

From their places of retreat, they began to send out missionaries to traverse the Moslem world preaching the doctrine known as Batin (inner, esoteric). According to the Batinites (as they were called by the orthodox) the Qur'an should be interpreted allegorically and religious truth could be ascertained by the discovery of an inner meaning of which the outer form was but a veil intended to keep that truth from the eyes of the uninitiate.

Novices were quietly initiated under oath of secrecy in the secret doctrines including the formation of the universe by emanation from the divine essence, transmigration of souls, the immanence of the Divinity in Isma'il and the expectation of his early return as the Mahdi. Initiation is said to have nine graded stages. (much like Freemasonry)

The Shiah from its earliest times had relied on secrecy, organization, and initiation for its survival. Under the Fatimid dynasty in Cairo, the Abode of Learning was the training ground for fanatics who were conditioned to believe in a special divine mission. In order to do this, the original democratic Islamic ideas had to be overcome by skilled teachers.

Members were enrolled with the understanding that they were to receive hidden power and timeless wisdom. There was no lack of applicants. Classes were divided into study groups, some composed of men, others of women, termed Assemblies of Wisdom.

THE NINE DEGREES OF INITIATION

FIRST: the teachers threw their pupils into a state of doubt about all conventional ideas, religious and political. The idea was to make the aspirant believe that what he/she had been taught by previous mentors was prejudiced and capable of challenge.

this caused one to lean upon the personality of the teacher. It was also hinted that formal knowledge was merely the cloak for hidden, inner powerful truth. This was done till the student was ready to swear a vow of blind allegiance to one of the teachers.

THE SECOND DEGREE: took the form of initiation into the fact that the Imams were the true and only sources of secret knowledge and power.

THE THIRD DEGREE the esoteric names of the Seven Imams were revealed and the secret words by which they could be conjured and by which the powers inherent in the very repetition of their names could be liberated and used for the individual in service for the sect.

In THE FOURTH DEGREE the succession of the seven mystical law-givers and magical personalities was given to the learner.

THE FIFTH DEGREE named twelve apostles under the seven prophets, whose names and functions and magical powers were described. In this degree, the power to influence others by means of personal concentration was taught.

to obtain THE SIXTH DEGREE involved instruction in the methods of analytical and destructive argument in which the postulant had to pass a stiff examination.

THE SEVENTH DEGREE brought revelation of the Great Secret: that all humanity and all creation were one and every single thing was a part of the whole, which included the creative and destructive power. The Ishmali could make use of the power which was ready to be awakened w/in him/her, and overcome those who knew nothing of the immense potential of the rest of humanity.

In THE EIGHTH DEGREE the aspirant had to believe that all religion, philosophy and the like were fraudulent. All that mattered was the individual, who could attain fulfilment only thru servitude to the greatest developed power--the Imam.

THE NINTH and last degree brought the revelation of the secret that there was no such thing as belief: all that mattered was action. and the only possessor of the reasons for carrying out any action was the chief of the sect.

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This esoteric system found an able enthusiast in one 'Abdullah, whose father was an occultist in Jerusalem. It was he who perfected the religio-political system of the Isma'lites.

From his headquarters in Northern Syria, he and his successors sent secret missionaries who systematically made their starting-point the arousing of skepticism in the would-be follower.

Taking advantage of the growing enmity between Arab and Persian Moslems he conceived of a project uniting in a secret socitety, with grades of initiation, both conquered and conquerors, who, as free thinkers would use religion as a scheme to destroy the caliphate and give Abdullah or his descendants the

throne. This was the scheme that resulted in the rise of the Fatimid dynasty in Tunisia and Egypt.

QARMATIANS

Before his death in 874 Abdullah found a most zealous pupil and proselytizer in Hamdan Qarmat, an Iraqui Peasant who had read in the stars that the Iranians were going to regain the empire of the Arabs. In this movement, the ancient feud between the native peasantry and the Arab nomads found expression.

Around 890, Qarmat built a headquarters as a refuge for emigrants near al-Kufah. Active propaganda swelled the number of members in the new sect.

Fundamentally, the organization was a secret society based on a system of communism with initiation necessary for admission. The new community supported itself from a common fund created thru contributions which were seemingly voluntary but in reality a series of taxes, each heavier than the preceding.

They used an allegorical catichism based on the Qur'an and supposedly adapted to all creeds, all races and all castes. They stressed tolerance and equality, organized workers and artisans into guilds. It is believed that the ceremonial ritual of these trade guilds reached the west and influenced the formation of European guilds and Freemasonry.

The Qarmatian movement with its communistic, revolutionary tendencies developed into a most malignant growth in the body politic of Islam. To shed the blood of their opponents, even if Moslem, they considered legitimate.

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They succeeded in founding an independent state in 899 on the western shore of the Persian Gulf with Al Ahsa for their capital. Soon this state became the bulwark of their power and the terror of the caliphate in Baghdad. From here they conducted a series of raids on neighboring lands.

The culmination of these raids came in 930 when Mecca was seized and the Black Stone, the most sacred relic of Islam, of the Ka'ba was carried off. This was returned 21 years later by order of the Fatimid Caliph (in 951). From here on they declined in power but lived on quietly until the end of their independence in 1077.

The Qarmatian movement left a deep mark on the intellectual history of Islam, since their authors exerted considerable influence on a variety of Muslim thinkers. Qarmatian doctrines were also adopted by other extremist sects, such as the Assassins and the Druzes.

The Fatimids retained some Qarmatian rituals which had been introduced by the early leaders of the movement in western North Africa. The rapid spread of these doctrines in the Muslim world was seen by Sunni authors as a threat to the unity of the community, and for that reason they denounced them as contrary to the interests of Islam and sought to trace their origins to pre-ilsamic heresies.

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THE NUSAYRIS OF NORTHERN SYRIA

this group, who still exist, were named for Muhammed ibn-Nusayr at the end of the 9th century (874) was a partisan of the 11th iman. These present a remarkable example of a group passing directly from paganism to Isma'ilism. This explains the points of marked difference between them and the main body of Isma'ilites.

The Nusayris, in company with other sects of extreme Shi'ites but unlike the Isma'ilites, consider "Ali the incarnation of the deity. These are sometimes called "Alawites because of this belief.

Unlike the Druzes and other Moslem sects they possess a liturgy and have adopted a number of Christian festivals, including Christmas and Easter. Some of them bear Christian names such as Matta (Matthew), Yuhanna (John) and Hilanah (Helen)

In addition to these borrowings from Christian sources their religion, which they practise with even greater secrecy than the Druzes, has retained clear remnants of their former pagan beliefs.

Today, some 300,000 adepts of this system, mostly peasants, inhabit the mountainous region of northern and central Syria and are scattered as far as Turkish Cilicia.

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THE DRUZES

This is a Syrian offshoot of the Isma'ilyya sect of Shi'ism. The name comes from Al-Darazi (d. 1019), a non Arab leader of the movement, which originated in the last years of the reign of al-Hakim, Caliph of the Fatimid dynasty of Egypt (996-1021).

In the Ishmali religious hierarchy, al-Hakim was regarded as the infallible imam and was also an absolute monarch, exercising spiritual supremacy as possessor of the "active intellect" transmitted by the divine will thru a divinely ordained family.

Al Hakim, an eccentric ruler in the exercise of his authority as both temporal and spiritual head of the Ismailis, seems to have wished to be regarded as an incarnation of divinity. Out of the resulting confusion over his claims, which greatly weakened the Fatimid establishment, the Druze movement arose in 1017.

Hamza ibn Ali, a Persian, was responsible for establishing al-Hakim's standing among the Druzes as the embodiment of the ultimate One who created the first cosmic principle, the intellect. The Hakim cult in this sense became the worship of the One alone, manifested in al-Hakim.

From this belief comes the name muwahhidum ("Unitarians"), which the Druze apply to themselves. Hamza's teaching was founded on extremist Ismailism in its description of the spiritual hierarchy which embodies cosmic principles.

According to Hamza, there were five great cosmic ranks, each embodied in a human leader: these were the Intellect, the universal soul, the word, the precedere, and the follower.

Below these were a number of missionaries and preachers embodying cosmic effort, and subordinate to them were the ordinary believers.

In opposition to these cosmic ranks were a series of false ones, also created by the One, al-Hakim, and these embodied the

evil side of the cosmos. These latter will be abandoned by Al Hakim in the Last Days, when the messianic culmination of the era will be marked by the establishment of the worship of the One, revealed in al-Hakim.

The Druzes await the return of both al-Hakim and Hamza, who are believed to be in hiding like the other immans. During the occultation of Hamza, al-Muqtana became the link between Hamza and his followers, and it was under him that the Druze orthodoxy was established.

In 1033 al-Muqtana also went into hiding, a state corresponding to the "complete" occultation of the imamites. From then on the Druzes became a closed community, keeping their religious doctrines secret. Those who know the system are known as "the wise".

The others in the community are the "ignorant." The wise alone take part in the religious services on Thursday evening, although the ignorant may be admitted to the least secret of those services.

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THE SUFI MOVEMENT AS HERETICAL

Since I discuss the Sufi's a great deal in Western Mystical Traditions, I will simply mention some of the things that have rubbed the orthodox the wrong way over the centuries.

The Sufi tradition developed in the 9th century (800's) and seems to have arisen in Syria where Christian monks were being imitated. It was a syncretic movement, absorbing many elements

from Christianity, neo-platonism, Gnosticism and Buddhism. It appealed to converted Christians, using much of thier liturgy and developing an eschatological traditions with an antichrist.

the mystical element began the turn toward heresy. Dhu al Nun, who gave Sufism its permanent shape, introduced the idea that true knowledge of God comes only thru ecstasy not tradition.

From there the step to pantheism was easy. It was in Persia that this developed. Al Hallaj, probably the most famous sufi martyr, was crucified in 922, decapitated and burned by the Abbasid Inquisition for declaring "I am the Truth"(ie, God). The poem that expresses his doctrine follows:

I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I

We are two souls dwelling in one body.

When thou seest me, thou seest Him:

And when thou seest Him, thous seest us both.

Al Hallaj's tomb in west Baghdad stands as that of a saint and many make pilgramages to it.

IBN AL-ARABI' (1165-1240)

Though never killed as a heretic, it was Ibn al aribi (1165-1240) who developed the theology of pantheism w/in Islam. He was from Spain but is buried in Damascus. His tomb is enclosed in a large mosque bearing his name.

However, many heretics did use his writings to serve their own purposes. For example, the Ishmali's used Ibn Arabi's teachings on the Perfect Man, the Oneness of Being, etc.

poets received from Ibn Arabi a language of discourse which which to expand their comprehension of a complex already central

to their very being: EROS, desire, and the borderland between erotic and mystical consciousness.

Out of this arose a spiritual practice, the "Witness Game", which uses imaginal Yoga to transmute erotic desire into spiritual consciousness. The means include poetic and musical improvisation, dance and "gazing" chastely at beautiful boys (the practice was also known as "contemplation of the Beardless")

This teaching was perfected in the centuries after Ibn Arabi's death by a series of gifted poets closely associated with his school. Altogether this constitutes what is known as a Persian "School of Love".

Although these poets of the Witness game followed the letter of the Shariah and its sexual code, their dangerous game of Sublimation was condemned as rank heresy by many Mullahs. As one complained, "They kiss a slave boy and claim to have seen God."

However Orthodox (or not) the Sufis might have been in their private lives, their poetry has given much aid and comfort to "real Heretics" like the Ismalis, who would of course take quite literally such lines as Iraqi's:

Forget the Kaaba/ the vintner's gates are open!

Al- Arabi's influence of the heretical traditions can be seen in the cosmopolitan philosopher-rebels as well as sufi poets. As his thought moves eastward from Andalusia thru Egypt and Persia, it begins to acquire a more popular, cultic aspect.

In Afghanistan and North India the tradition includes the so-called Lawless dervish orders such as the Qalandars, the

transvestite dancers and hashish-maulangs, heterodox sufi orders which include Ismailism, Tantric Hinduism, Bhakti Yoga, millenarian Shi'ism and dervish madness.

THE ROSARY AND CULT OF SAINTS.

The rosary, brought from India via Eastern Christian monks, was at first considered an innovation but today is accepted throughout Islam except by the very puritanical Wahhabis of Saudi Arabia. It also came, via the crusaders, into the Christian west during this time.

Veneration of saints finds no sanction in the Qur'an but sprang up, following christian practice, in response to the mystic call and to meet the need of bridging the gap between humans and God.

There is no formal cannonization in Islam but popular acclaim is based on performance of miracles. By the 12th century, the idea that this was idolotry was dissipated mainly thru Sufi influence.

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