Islam: Beliefs and Observances

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Caesar E. Farah
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The literature of the Sufis is rich and revealing of their unselfish mystical search for God. Indeed, Islam's Sufis have left us a most heavily endowed body of devotional literature, enough to evoke the envy of all those who have dedicated themselves to the worship of the one God.

A more lasting impression on the orthodox body of Islam was felt during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when a number of outstanding orthodox scholars strove to restate the bases of Islamic theology independent of the set dogmatism and formalism enshrined in the orthodox manuals of religion. These scholars attempted to place more emphasis on the psychological and ethical elements in religion.

The Sufi influence in the Sufi world was persistent, albeit circumscribed. Here Sufi doctrine and Shí'í "orthodoxy" fused in the work of Mulla Sadra (d. 1640) and Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (d. 1826), the systematizer of Sadra's beliefs into a heterodoxy termed Shaykhiyyah. Their chief doctrine stressed the necessity of having an open channel of communication with the "Hidden Imam" of the Shi'ah. It is this one concept that gave rise almost immediately to the Babi movement and its offshoot Bahá'ísm.

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THE TRIUMPH OF Ash'ari orthodoxy represented the first significant religious development of any consequence down to present times. Several factors may account for this subsequent dearth of theological agitation. The political dislocations in the

body politic resulting from the Crusades, the split of the 'Abbasid empire at the seams and the Mongol invasions, the rise of multiple dynasties, and the disappearance of caliphal authority as a force symbolizing spiritual unity, the deterioration of commerce and sources of wealth, the stepped up incursions of Tartar and other Turkic invaders, all contributed to a widespread spirit of uncertainty.

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that Islam should be championed through rationalism, but rather through the authentication made possible by revelation and divine assistance. The Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh on the other hand advocated the "precedence of reason over the literal meaning of the Divine Law in case of conflict between them." Later on, when Ahmadi missionaries were confronted by Christian rivals in search of converts, they did not hesitate to resort to reason, arguing that "objections raised against Islam are due either to a lack of serious reflection or because passion is allowed to prevail over reason."10

The Ahmadi stand on science countenances the important premise that Islam encourages the study and use of science, as proven historically when Muslims in medieval times made basic contributions to the sciences. If the spirit or text of the Qur'an is used as a measure, there can be no contradiction; indeed, science is more incompatible with Christianity, it is argued, than it is with Islam.

Similarly the Ahmadis find Súfism perfectly Islamic on the grounds that "the leaders of thought among them [the Súfis], never diverged a hair's breadth from the path chalked out for them by Islam." Furthermore "they have been the true expounders of Islam, and during the decline of the Muslims it is they who held aloft the beacons of true Islamism." In continuing their defense of the Safis the Ahmadis argued that "There was never any question of their departing from the Holy Quran [sic] or the traditions of the Holy Prophet." What the orthodox termed as "Súfi aberrations" the Ahmadis defended by denial, holding that the Sufis "put down all those beliefs or practices that savoured of asceticism, monasticism or - esotericism - as un-Islamic [sic] and wholly foreign to their own convictions.

Mbisin [?] originated not from Sunnism but from Shi'ism. Like the Ahmadiyah, this earlier movement was also eclectic. In the earlier centuries we witnessed the rise of equally eclectic and syncretistic movements: the Nusayri, Druze, Yazidi, a number of Shi'i sects, then later, in the Turkish period of ascendancy, of the Bektashi order.

The founder of the Babi sect is Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad of

Shiraz who bad been an adherent of the Shaykhi school of philosophical thought among the Shi'ahs. The sect's name derived from the symbolic name "Bab" (gateway) by which Sayyid 'Ali called himself in reference to the "gateway" through which divine truth is said to be revealed unto the believers. It was on May 23, 1844 that Sayyid 'Ali, "moved by the Spirit of God," officially proclaimed his mission to the Persians, in the city of Shiraz where there had gathered together "eighteen spiritually prepared souls, men of religious wisdom to whom it bad been given to understand divine realities." 12

The core of Babi teachings lies in Sayyid 'Ali's belief that he had been divinely commissioned to warn his listeners of the coining of the "great promised One," "He-whom-God-shall-manifest,"the "Latter-Day Revelator," "The Lord of Hosts" promised in the revealed sacred writings of the past who would establish soon the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Bab preached a peculiar mixture of liberal religious doctrine reinforced by a heavy dose of Gnosticism which actually yielded little success. His followers were few and scattered throughout Persia. Persian officials, not to mention the Sh!'ah fathers, did not take too kindly to Sayyid 'Ali's personal and doctrinal claims. By inciting his listeners the Bab compelled Persian authorities to arrest him and, following an uprising of his followers, to execute him as a common criminal in 1850.

But the movement established by the Bab did not die out as the Persian authorities had hoped. It merely changed form and proceeded to grow and spread, mostly outside Persia. Instrumental in the further spread of the beliefs established by Sayyid 'Ali was the role of a disciple, Bahá'u'lláh (d. 1892) who had taken charge of the majority of the Babis following the split that ensued upon the death of the founder.

Baha'ullah continued to elaborate on the doctrine of the Bab in such radical terms that he and his successors managed to draw it outside the religious fold of Islam, Since then the original doctrine based on Islam has taken on the trappings of a universal religion resting on two sustaining principles: pacifism and humanitarianism.

The movement was driven out of Persia largely because of the intense persecution to-which its adherents were subjected. Bahá'u'llah himself spent four months in a prison in Tehran. Scores of Babis were turned over by Persian officials to the orthodox Shí'í fathers to be tortured and slain for their heresy. Baha'ullah was exiled to Baghdad, then under Ottoman rule, in the hope of discouraging his followers and confining Babi preachings to limited circles. But be continued his preachings in Baghdad and

in the fury of ensuing orthodox reaction he sought refuge in the mountain fastness of Kurdistan. Next he was exiled to Istanbul, thence under military surveillance to Adrianople where he lived and preached for five years. These setbacks notwithstanding, his small group of followers continued to see in Bahá'ulláh "Him-whom-God-shall-manifest."

Trouble still followed him wherever he went, because of the anger of the Sunni Muslims, who were provoked by his radical preachings. Finally in the summer of 1863 he was led to the fortress prison of Acre (Palestine) on the Mediterranean coast together with about seventy men, women, and children who constituted his following at that time. Privation and suffering accompanied him, and his followers until his death in 1892. A shrine was later erected over his burial place near Haifa. Today it serves as a place of worship and prayer, visited annually by those who call themselves "Bahá'ís."

His missionary activities were continued by his son 'Abd-al-Baha' who styled himself "The Center of the Covenant." He carried Bahá'í teachings first into Egypt, then into Europe, and later to America where be resided for eight months in 1912. While in America 'Abd-al-Bahá traveled extensively from coast to coast and delivered addresses to various churches, synagogues, university and civic organizations. During the period of World War I he confined his efforts to humanitarian activities in Palestine and was knighted after the war by the British Crown for these services. When be died in 1921, he was entombed next to the Bab in the Bahá'í shrine on Mt. Carmel.

The core of Bahá'í teaching lies in the collective writings of the founder, the Bab, known as The Bayan (Expositor) with its stress on awaiting ('Him-whom-~God-shall~manifest.") In the period of "awaiting," the devotees are exhorted to prepare themselves spiritually for meeting Bahaullah. What is significant about Bahá'ulláh's teachings is their source: Torah, Bible, Qur'án, which makes the movement highly eclectic and imparts to it the basis for a universalistic appeal.

Bahá'ísm utilizes a sophisticated approach founded on the promise that man can not achieve a higher spiritual status if he does not perfect the powers latent in his body and soul; training the body, it is said, provides man the organism to manifest his spiritual side. Education, according to the "world teacher" (Bahá'u'lláh), plays an important role in summoning all of mankind to one spiritual world-consciousness.

The Bahá'í view is that Muhammad arose at a time when people in Arabia were submerged in ignorance and superstition,

and that he changed the situation by calling to the worship of one God and inculcating his followers with high moral standards through a code of laws and ordinances suitable to the spiritual and material needs of his day. The Muslim "church," however, soon departed from the real spirit of Muhammad's teachings. But Muhammad had taken the precaution of preparing his people for the "great latter-day Bahá'í revelation," as witnessed in the Hadith. The time of the spiritual awakening, equated with resurrection, was to be accompanied by signs mentioned also in the Bible, that is when religious faith has decayed and general demoralization set in.

So the early converts to Bahá'ísm accepted the new calling with the understanding that the Bab is the promised Mahdi and Bahaullah the Christ (spirit), as both seem faithfully to have met the prophesied condition and time of appearance.

The Bahá'í Revelation is held to confirm also the Hindu truth of religion as well as the Buddhist expectation of "Maitreya" ~ i.e., "He-whose-name-is-Kindness," or Bahá'u'lláh. Thus he becomes to the Buddhists the return of their promised Buddha. 'Me Zoroastrians bad looked upon fire as the great cleanser; the Bahá'ís say this really signifies spiritual purity, "for it is through the spiritual fire of the love of God that men's souls are purified and quickened into eternal life." The Zoroastrians also have similar ideas concerning the resurrection or spiritual judgment. The end of the Zoroastrian dispensation, as foretold in their sacred writings, is contingent also on the prevalence of spiritual impurity which would necessitate another "Manifestation" to bring the divine fire of purification, or love of God, back to earth. Their latter-day prophet, "Shah Bahrain," is again the bearer of the Bahá'í Revelation, which accounts for the Zoroastrians of India and Persia-known today as Parsees-accepting the message of Baha'ullah. This is indeed an attempt at the broadest possible symbiosis, with Bahá'í Revelation being equated with the long-awaited one of Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Hindus, and Zoroastrians.

The Bahá'ís evolved a liberal cult confirming to the essential ingredients of other faiths - temple worship, fasting, prayer, good deeds to supplement creed and dogma, separation of state and church, and the unification of mankind through common institutions acceptable to all, such as what Bahá'ulláh represents, based not on separation of church and state but on the union of religion and state.

The Bahá'í modernist outlook stems from the conception that peace is desirable and can be achieved in the federation of all small and large nations and the establishment of a universal governing body

supervised by one system of adjudication; Bahaism teaches cooperation in all affairs, between capital and labor, East and West. Cooperation materially and spiritually will make of various peoples one harmonious world-family.

There is no conflict between the divine and the natural; there exists rather, it is stated, scientific harmony between the two and perfect accord throughout the whole of creation. Indeed, natural science in the view of the Bahá'ís "teaches man how to live properly upon a human plane." Man can discover and utilize the laws of nature; but the laws of God are revealed unto man only through His mediators: Christ, Muhammad, the other prophets, and Baha'ullah.

The near-avid interest in modern thinking by the Bah5'is bespeaks their respect for it as an aid to religious fulfillment. "This general and widespread spirit of modern thought," they argue,
"has been as a plough which has prepared the religious ground of the world to receive the spiritual seeds of universal religious ideals."13 Bahais regard themselves as being in perfect harmony with modern trends on the grounds that "the modernists of all religions are teaching many of the same principles as held by the followers of the Bahai Cause."14 Conflicts in the past between science and theology are attributed to "imaginations and superstitions" which religions had accumulated over the centuries to make them unacceptable to science. Since these are held to be outside the realm of the actual teachings of the great prophets like Jesus and Muhammad, dispensing with such unhealthy accretions in no way compromises the basic teachings of these religions. And by eliminating them there would remain no area of conflict between theology and science.

What makes the Bahá'ís modernists in their outlook is the conviction that their doctrine and teachings are free from the superstitions of the past and are compatible with modern science.

The Role of Extra-Shari'ah Legislation

Such radical movements typified by the Ahmadiyah and Bahaiyah are symptomatic of the impact of modern thinking on traditional beliefs and organizational concepts in Islam. The trend towards creeping change and readjustment may not be fully delineated as of the moment; but there is no denying that the motions already in process tend nearly in that direction, and not even the Shari'ah will be spared further scrutiny.

Revisions of the Shari'ah started tangentially with a variety of Ottoman decrees in the nineteenth century and more directly with the secular laws enacted by Muslim leaders in the twentieth. There are definite attempts in the Arab countries today, excluding

perhaps Saudi Arabia, consciously to adapt Shari legislation to the needs of modern life and to a more liberal conception of human views. The resulting reforms betray careful thinking, stemming from the search and utilization of precedents in the Shari'ah that are best suited for the realization of such reforms without encroaching on the spirit and intrinsic philosophy underlying it. There is no outright innovation, but the trend towards an eclectic system of legislating for modern needs within the more broadly interpreted tenets of the canon law is clearly in evidence.

Muslim beads of state and legislators today may seem to be resorting to a form of ijtihad, justified by the argument that it is their prerogative to override a traditional canonical principle. if the interests of the modern public demand it. Invariably they resort to the argument that they are not innovating outrightly but simply choosing from the opinions of accepted, albeit rival, jurists.

They have circumvented Ijma' with the argument that it can not be established how encompassing public consensus really was when resorted to in the past. They have also drawn a line between the compulsive and permissive nature of canonical decrees on the grounds that by exploiting the permissiveness of a decree they are committing an act of conscience which they are willing to risk should they be called upon to account for it on the Day of Judgment. One of their stronger arguments, however, is that a divine ordinance can not be binding for all time when the condition and circumstance of its promulgation have changed.

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Islam in America

Islam in America is comparatively a very recent phenomenon. Muslim immigrants from Arab countries, India, Malaya, Yugoslavia, and Albania form small enclaves located mostly in the larger cities, although it is not uncommon to find them in the smaller cities as well.

These Muslim immigrants and their descendants are representative of the numerous sects of Islam: Sunni, Druzes, Shi'ites, Ahmadiyah, Bahá'í. They have organized themselves into numerous societies which reflect their ethnical derivation with all types of women's and youth's auxiliary groups.

American Muslims have endeavored to observe the tenets of their faith as best as they can determine them. Besides the Islamic mosque and institute in the capital, which caters principally to the diplomatic Corps representing Muslim states, there are only a few other mosques in places like Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, and Cedar Rapids. It is difficult to ascertain the number of immigrant

Muslims in America because statistics are lacking. An educated guess would point to about ten thousand. They
are mostly withdrawn. into themselves and have no active interest in propagating Islam in America. They have their Islamic culture centers in.New York, Washington, and San Francisco where the Sunni view predominates. These centers are open to all those interested in learning about Islam.

The Qadiyani Ahmadis and Bahá'ís are, on the other hand, quite active in disseminating their respective versions, of Islam. The Sunni elements lose no time, however, in discrediting their claims to Islam wherever and whenever the opportunity presents itself. Yet both have well organized missionary activities and are willing to spend to spread their beliefs; this type of zeal is lacking among the orthodox Muslim groups.

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