

Schisms and Heterodoxy

Looking critically at the divisions and intolerance that have plagued the Muslim community throughout history. By **DR. JAVEED AKHTER**

ONE of Islam's major objectives is to achieve unity of mankind by embracing the unity of God. The first and essential step toward unity of mankind is the unity of the Muslim community (*Umma*.) Quran's exhortations to Muslims to remain united are stated in clear and unambiguous terms.

"And hold fast, all together, unto the bond with Allah, and do not draw apart from one another" (6:159). "And remember the blessings, which Allah has bestowed upon you: how you were enemies, He brought hearts together, so that through His blessings you become brethren" (21:92-93).

Islam's annoyance at those who tear apart the unity of the community "wide asunder piece by piece" (23:52) is unmistakable.

The condemnation of previous communities who have broken apart in sects also appears forcefully on multiple occasions (6:159; 21:92-93). It is therefore surprising and perplexing to see the extent of division in the Muslim community. Heterodoxy or departure from the original religious point of

view of the Quran and *sunna* (the example) of Prophet Muhammad appears to be the rule rather than the exception. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to identify a group that is universally accepted as truly representing the tenets of Quran.

Currently, there are a multitude of Islamic and quasi-Islamic sects. In one instance a heterodox sect has evolved into an entirely new religion Bahaism. This old and continuing phenomenon of discord and heterodoxy deserves close scrutiny and analysis.

Although chronological and descriptive accounts of the various movements and sects in Islam are available and useful, it would be more instructive to look at them from a causative point of view. An attempt at understanding the reasons, which lead to the departures from the norm, would be more meaningful than a mere cataloging of beliefs and practices.

I. POLITICAL DISCORD ABOUT SUCCESSION

In the first civil war fought among Muslims at Siffin in 669 C.E (37 A.H), Ali and Muawiya agreed to settle the dispute

about succession by arbitration. A group of puritans among the followers of Ali disagreed and broke away forming the first heterodox group in the history of Islam. They believed only God could decide the issue of succession. How this could be accomplished is a mystery to many. One of the beliefs of this group, "The Exitors" (*Kharajiyah*) was that any Muslim who committed a major sin became de facto an apostate and earned the death penalty.

Though sincere in their beliefs, "The Exitors" were uncompromising and dogmatic and were responsible for much violence in early Islam. Their descendants are called Ibadites after an early leader Abdullah bin Ibad and are much more moderate in their views.

Political discord about succession also led to the formation of the party of Ali (*Shia Ali*) now simply called the Shia. The Shias account for approximately 10-15 percent of Muslims. They believe that their religious leader or *Imam* has to be a direct descendant of Ali and is infallible. The Imam is the only source of religious instruction and guidance. There are many sub-sects among the Shias. The sub-sects are based largely on the number at which the chain of Imams is believed to have broken with the occultation, rather than death, of the last Imam in the chain. Iranians (Ithna Asharis or twelve Imams) believe the chain broke with the 12th Imam.

The "Ismailis" on the other hand claim the chain broke with the 7th Imam. The Ismailis consecrate the number 7 and point out that there are 7 heavens, 7 orifices in the head, 7 stages of knowledge, 7 major prophets and world goes around in cycles of 7 thousand years. Shia philosophy is highly chiliastic awaiting the return of the "occulted Imam." In the absence of the Imam his surrogate, for example the Ayatollah, has absolute authority

2. CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES OF OPINION ABOUT "FREEDOM OF ACTION VERSUS THE WILL OF ALLAH"

Wasil ibn Ata broke off from his mentor Hasan al-Basari a famous teacher, and founded the Mutazalite movement. Itazala the root word for Mutazila means to secede. The issue at hand was the status of a Muslim who had committed a major sin. Was he as the Kharajites claimed an apostate and should be killed or was he merely a hypocrite as Hasan al-Basari taught? Wasil ibn Ata felt the status of that category of sinner was somewhere between those two positions. Mutazalites were essentially rationalists and believed man had free will.

They proclaimed Quran to have been "created in time and that it wasn't the uncreated word of Allah." Heavily influenced by Greek (Hellenistic) philosophy they applied reason to solve all problems. They were ascendant in the time of Khalifa al-Mamun in 212 A.H. and persecuted others. The next Khalifa, in whose reign Asharism took hold, in turn persecuted them. Al-Ashari a former Mutazalite formed an anti-Mutazalite movement named after him. This school proposed "man has no

power over his will but has control over his responsibilities, even though they are willed by Allah." The famous Nizamiyah School was founded to propagate the Ashari viewpoint. Asharism is the prevalent viewpoint on man's free will in Islam today.

3. MYSTIC INFLUENCES

Sufism is a reactive movement that arose to counter and soften the rigid and harsh ritualism of orthodox Islam. It injected a heavy dose of mysticism and is widely accepted as the "inner dimension" of Islam. Sufis are ascetic in their practices and their language is veiled and allusive. There is a liberal use of metaphors of wine and love in Sufi discourse. *Dhikr* (Trance) sessions are important in their practice. There are many Sufi sects in South and Central Asia and Iran. Most Sufis are Sunnis. Some Sufi practices appear to be influenced by Persian Shamanism and Indian Hinduism. In the Indian sub-continent the "Barelvis" follow many of the Sufi practices including use of music (*Qawwali*) and intercession by their teacher or peer.

Wahabism, founded a little over 200 years ago, rejects all innovation in Islam after the third century from the Prophet Muhammad's time. They are rigid in their interpretation of the sharia (Islamic jurisprudence) and notoriously intolerant of Sufism and of innovation. One major reason for Wahabism's continued influence is its patronage by the Saudi royal family. Wahabism is the official creed of Saudi Arabia.

4. BACK TO THE ROOTS MOVEMENTS

Wahabism, founded a little over 200 years ago, rejects all innovation in Islam after the third century from the Prophet Muhammad's time. They attack saint worship and believe in divine decree (*Qadr*) in all human endeavors. They are rigid in their interpretation of the *Sharia* (Islamic jurisprudence) and notoriously intolerant of Sufism and of innovation. One major reason for Wahabism's continued influence is its patronage by the Saudi royal family. Wahabism is the official creed of Saudi Arabia. An example of the literalist Wahabi interpretation of Islam is that women are denied the right to drive a car to "protect their dignity." The Deobandi movement of the Indian sub-continent is a watered down version of Wahabism.

5. MODERNIZING MOVEMENTS

Other reformers feel that Muslim renaissance will come by way of modernization and finding creative solutions to new problems based on old principles (*Ijtihad*). Syed Ahmed Khan, popularly known as Sir Syed, formed the Aligarh Muslim uni-

versity with the intent of bringing Western education to Muslims. Another important reformer, Mohammad Abduh and his disciple Rashid Rida in Egypt formed the Salafiya movement. They ascribed Quranic verses about human institutions to prophet's thinking rather than the word of Allah.

There have been a number of other reformers like Ali Shariati in the Shia tradition, Jamaluddin Afghani who was a charismatic speaker but wrote little, the Pakistani scholar of Islamic thought Fazalur Rahman (who did much of his work at the University of Chicago), and among current scholars, Khaled Abu Fadl, who teaches at the UCLA Law School. However these reformers have been unable to generate populist reform movements and influence only a minority of Muslims.

6. FOLLOWERS OF CHARISMATIC LEADERS AND GROUPS THAT ARE LOOKING FOR A SAVIOR

Hashashians, consumers of *Hashish* (Assassins) were the followers of Hasan al-Salah. The followers of this creed were heavily indoctrinated in the Ismaili brand of Shia Islam. Active

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in 1112 C.E. (480A.H.) they were believed to follow their leaders instructions unto death. The stories about them claim that would take Hashish and would go unhesitatingly on missions of assassination as well as suicide. Most of these stories appear to be fiction perpetrated by the Crusaders who were constantly harassed by daring raids from this group. The survivors of Hashashians are called Khojas whose titular head is the Agha Khan.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmed 1922 C.E. (1290 A.H.), the leader of the Ahmediya movement, started out as a reformer. Later, he declared himself many titles, including “Prophet,” “Mahdi of Islam,” the promised “Messiah of Christians” and “Krishna of Hindus.” The Ahmediya movement is basically a personality cult and has broken onto Qadiyani and Lahori factions. The state of Pakistan has declared it un-Islamic. However this has been successfully challenged in South African courts. It is quite likely that just as the Bahais did earlier, the Ahmediyas may declare themselves a separate religion. The “Hizb ut Tahrir” is a relatively new group that has as its main goal the establishment of the Caliph (*Khalifa*) who will be the savior for the Muslims. They feel Muslims should unite in one Islamic state that is administered by Sharia. Anyone who governs by non-Islamic law is considered either a-transgressor (*Fasiq*) or a disbeliever

(*Kafir*.) Their economic system calls for the state revenues to be collected from multiple sources including booty of war (*Maal-e-Ghanimat*).

7. THE SUICIDAL MILITANT

Islam's rejection of suicide is clear and categorical. This rejection is based on the belief that life is a sacred gift from God that man may not end even if he is in pre-terminal distress. Islam's rejection of killing or even harming the innocent is equally clear and forceful.

“[I]f one slayeth another for other than man-slaughter or for spreading disorder in the land, it shall be as if he hath slain all mankind. But if one saveth a life of a single person, it shall be as if he hath saved the life of all mankind” (Al-Maida. 5:32). It is therefore all the more surprising that the 21st century has seen the use of suicide attacks by militant Muslims to fight oppression. The desire to fight oppression is understandable as is the sense of powerlessness and humiliation in the face of hypocrisy and remorseless brutality. However the use of suicide attacks that additionally have caused many innocent deaths is difficult to understand. These groups justify attacks on the military and civilians by designating the target groups or nations as those that are spreading “disorder” (*Fasad*) on earth.

One scholar, citing civilian Palestinian deaths including the killing of large numbers of children, has rationalized suicide attacks within the state of Israel but not outside. The suicide attackers see themselves as martyrs to a noble cause and the act of suicide as altruistic.

8. THE EVANGELISTS (TABLIGHIS)

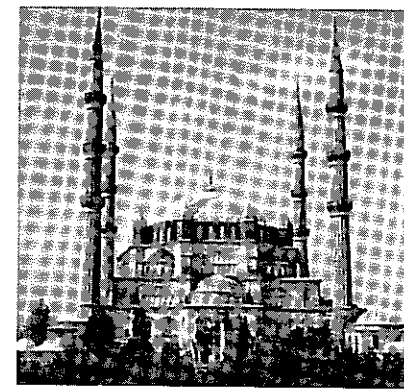
The second largest congregation of Muslims after the Hajj is the gathering (*Ijtema*) of the followers of the “Tablighi Jamaat.” Formed in the mid 19th century in India to evangelize new Muslims in the villages of North India. It has become immensely popular and claims a following in the millions. The Tablighis follow a very structured routine that is simple though demanding. They are very particular about how they dress, eat, sleep and interact with others. Their program has six steps to it that include bearing witness (*Kalimah*), performing ritual prayers (*Salat*), acquisition of knowledge and remembrance of Allah (*Ilm-o-Zikr*), social conduct that requires respect of all Muslims (*Ikram-e-Muslimeen*), sincerity of intent (*Ikhlis-e-Niyyat*), and sparing time for Allah (*Tafriq-e-Waqt*). This last requirement demands that the followers go away in groups for days to weeks at a time evangelizing other Muslims as well as rejuvenating their own faith.

9. MISCELLANEOUS

There have been many different movements in Muslim history that defy easy stratification. An example is the Qarmatians that were a communistic sect. They shared property and wives by way of initiation into the group. Their claim to infamy lies in

stealing the black stone (*Hajr-e-Aswad*) of Kaaba for over 20 years.

Islam influenced many of the local religions and traditions and sparked monotheistic movements in Hinduism. However a new religion Bahaim (also called Baubism) also emerged from it. Syed Ali Mohammad the charismatic founder of Bahaim had a Muslim background. Later he declared himself the gateway or “Baab” through which the divine truth is revealed. At various times he also called himself “Mahdi,” “Buddhist Maitrya” and “Shah Behram of Zoraster.”



LESSONS FROM PAST EXPERIENCES

A retrospective review of the various schisms leaves one with the impression that although some of these movements were truly bizarre most were an understandable result of the growth of a community. They were a result of diversity and vigor in religious discourse and the influence of the faiths and traditions Islam came into contact with during its spread. It is also striking how poorly these variances from the norm were tolerated. The extent of persecution the heterodox groups were subjected to was sometimes extreme. In many instances the persecution drove the heterodox group to break away completely from the main stream and form a different cult or even a new religion. It is also apparent that most of these schisms could have been prevented or at least modulated if the larger orthodox community of the time had practiced simple tolerance and compassion.

1. POLITICAL DISCORD ABOUT SUCCESSION

Political discord is avoidable by compromise for politics is indeed the art of compromise. Shia and Sunni discord may with good justification be called an accident of history. There are many areas of commonality between these two communities. The challenge is to focus on these areas of commonality and unite.

2. CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES

Honest conceptual disagreements will predictably occur in any large religious community. It is the intolerance of other's point of view that results in much discord and sometimes bloodshed. By cultivating the simple art of respecting honest differences of opinion much of this discord could have been avoided. Arguably honest differences of opinion are healthy in the growth of any community. The challenge, as has been observed, is to disagree without being disagreeable. This is an area where Muslims may learn valuable lessons both from the ethics of disagreement the early companions of Prophet Muhammad practiced. A true paradox is that Muslims have shown more tolerance toward non-Muslims than toward each other.

3. MYSTIC INFLUENCES

Sufism is the vehicle through which Islam spread in most of South Asia and central Asia. It remains an important vehicle for the spread of Islam in the U.S. and West. It continues to provide spiritual solace to millions. Its contributions to Islam are massive. Nevertheless it is worth noting that the poet/philosopher Iqbal considered it one of the major weaknesses affecting Muslims. Many orthodox Muslims share this viewpoint. Nonetheless Sufis should

be accepted in the main stream of Islam. They should take a hard look at some of the rituals that are heavily influenced by Hindu and Shaman practices as well reevaluate doctrines of intercession and self-annihilation.

4. BACK TO THE ROOTS MOVEMENTS

It is easy to understand the evolution of the back to the roots movements. These are a reaction to the mutations that have arisen in Islam over time as well as a yearning for Islam's ascendant past. If they are able to modulate their extremism they could play a healthy role in the evolution of the Muslim community.

5. MODERNIZING MOVEMENTS

Though diametrically opposed to the Wahabi/Salafi movements in their approach the modernizing movements share the objective of reforming the community and restoring its strength. Their approach at reforming Islam is completely different from the Wahabi group. They use the innovative or “Ijتهadi” approach as opposed to the literalist or “Taqlidi” approach of the Wahabi/Salafi groups. The modernist scholars, however, have been singularly unsuccessful in producing a populist movement and have remained largely elitist. If they could spawn a populist movement or teaching institution it would be of immense benefit to Islam and Muslims.

6. MOVEMENTS THAT SPRANG FROM CHARISMATIC LEADERS AND THE KHILAFAT GROUP

As long as there are gullible and naive people around, charismatic leaders can find fertile ground for their maverick ideologies. Additionally, many Muslims are looking for a charismatic leader, in some instances Khalifa, to be their savior. These charismatic leaders and sects exploit this popular yearning in establishing their hold on their followers. The only antidote to this is increasing the level of education and sophistication among the general populace. The orthodox mainstream should keep lines of communication open with these fringe groups rather than spend its energies in unproductive confrontation. The more we reject these groups the more likely it is that they will break off completely.

7. THE SUICIDAL MILITANT

The suicidal militants spring from young men with seething and legitimate anger toward the oppressors of Muslims all over the world. These violent followers of the non-violent religion of Islam are an anachronism. Their suicidal missions are reactive to the injustice they are faced with and not the result of an accepted theology or philosophy. Restoration of justice and fair play within nations and in international relations will largely vaporize the motivation for a suicidal mission.

8. THE EVANGELISTS (TABLIGHIS)

Some form of evangelism is an inevitable part of any religion. The intellectual leaders of this group have the opportunity to channel its enormous energy to practical piety like building homes for the homeless, teaching the illiterate, running food kitchens and shelters.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Will Muslims ever reach the degree of education and sophistication necessary to avoid schisms? The answer is unclear. However, after 9/11, Muslims do not have the luxury of remaining divided. The best chance of a moderate movement to emerge that would overcome disunity and heterodoxy among Muslims may still be in the West. The level of education among Muslims in the West is higher than in any Muslim majority country. They have free access to literature and varied opinion. This allows them to examine dif-

fering ideologies first hand without the filter of a biased opinion or censorship of the state or the intellectual oppression of the community that is present in most Muslim majority states.

Muslims in the West are also influenced by the local traditions of freedom of expression and defense of other's point of view. A maverick in the West is often tolerated and sometimes even celebrated rather than ostracized. The solution for heterodoxy does not merely lie in an attitudinal change. The emergence of a model Muslim state that is just, pluralistic, practices democracy based on Islamic principles, is successful economically and has clout and dignity in world affairs would be the best antidote for many of the extreme trends among Muslims. Muslims would look to this successful role model and may stop trying to replicate the past.

Would the monumentally self centered and often Machiavellian worldview of the dominant political culture in the West allow that to happen? Would a Muslim state overcome its internal challenges and emerge as a role model for Muslims today? Once again, the answers are unclear. Currently, the only candidate state for this role is Malaysia. Turkey under the leadership of modernist Muslims and not the illiberal secular military that rules it currently also has a remote chance. A united Muslim community clearly is the first step before Muslims may fulfill the Quranic mandate of uniting the entire mankind. •

Javeed Akhter is the founder of Sabrang Communications, a Chicago-based think tank.

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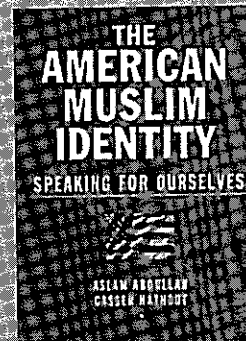
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