

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HERESY IN THE HISTORY OF ISLAM (1)

For the mediaeval Muslim, the significance of heresy was religious : it related, that is to say, to differences of belief, opinion or practice concerning divinity, revelation, prophecy, and matters deriving from these. What though these matters, in Islam, extended to include the whole range of public and political life, any further explanation, beyond the religious one, was unnecessary, even absurd, for what could be added to the greatest and most important of all the issues confronting mankind ? The grounds and terms of argument between opposing religious factions were almost invariably theological. That is not to say that Muslim polemicists always accepted the good faith of their opponents. Very often they accuse those whose doctrines they dislike of pursuing ulterior motives — but usually these ulterior motives are themselves religious. The commonest of them is the recurring theme of a plot to undermine Islam from within in favour of some other faith. This is usually connected with some more or less fabulous figure, of superlative malignity and perversity, who functions as a *diabolus ex machina*, to explain dissension and heresy in the Islamic community. This is in part due to the general tendency of Islamic historical tradition to attribute to the limitless cunning and multifarious activity of an individual the results of a long development of thought and action ; in part also to the tactic, familiar in other times and places, of discrediting critics within the community

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by associating them with enemies outside the community. The two classical examples are 'Abdallāh ibn Saba' and 'Abdallāh ibn Maymūn al-Qaddāh. The first, a convert from Judaism and a contemporary of the Caliph 'Alī, is credited with devising most of the beliefs and policies of the extremist Shī'a in the first centuries of Islam. On the second, an associate of Ismā'il ibn Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq, is fathered the whole complex development of the Ismā'ilī religion and organisation up to Fatimid times. He is variously described as a Jew, a Bardesanian and, most commonly, as an Iranian dualist; like his predecessor, he is alleged to have sought to destroy Islam from within in the interests of his previous religion. Modern criticism has shown that the roles attributed to these two, together with many of the doctrines ascribed to them, are exaggerated, distorted, and in many respects fictitious.

The mediaeval European, who shared the fundamental assumptions of his Muslim contemporary, would have agreed with him in ascribing religious movements to religious causes, and would have sought no further for an explanation. But when Europeans ceased to accord first place to religion in their thoughts, sentiments, interests, and loyalties, they also ceased to admit that other men, in other times and places, could have done so. To a rationalistic and materialistic generation, it was inconceivable that such great debates and mighty conflicts could have involved no more than 'merely' religious issues. And so historians, once they had passed the stage of amused contempt, devised a series of explanations, setting forth what they described as the 'real' or 'ultimate' significance 'underlying' religious movements and differences. The clashes and squabbles of the early churches, the great Schism, the Reformation, all were reinterpreted in terms of motives and interests reasonable by the standards of the day — and for the religious movements of Islam too explanations were found that tallied with the outlook and interests of the finders.

To the 19th century, obsessed with the problems of liberalism and nationality, only a struggle for national liberation could adequately explain the religious cleavage in Islam, the bitter

controversies between doctrine and doctrine, the armed clash of sect with sect. The intuition of Gobineau and Renan, the insight of Dozy and Darmesteter helped to create a picture of Shi'ism as a liberal revival of the Persian national genius, as a resurgence of the Aryanism of Iran in generous revolt against the alien and constricting Semitism of Arabian Islam. Increased knowledge among scholars of Shī'a literature and closer acquaintance by travellers with Shī'a practice soon exploded the legend of a liberal reformation. But the identification of Shi'ism with Iran was more persistent, and derived some support from the adoption of Shi'ism as the state religion of Persia from the 16th century onwards, as well as from the frequent statements by early authors attributing Shi'ite doctrines and activities to Persian converts.

Nevertheless this hypothesis is now generally abandoned. Wellhausen, Goldziher, Barthold and others have shown that the main centres of early Shi'ism were among the mixed, predominantly Semitic population of southern Iraq; that Shi'ism was first carried to Persia by the Arabs themselves, and for long found some of its most enthusiastic supporters there among the Arab soldiers and settlers, and in such places as the Arab garrison city of Qumm — even today one of the most vigorous centres of Shi'ite religion in Persia. Though racial antagonisms played their part in these struggles — and the 19th-century scholars made a lasting contribution in discerning them — they were not the sole or even the most potent factor. The accusations of the early polemicists are directed against the old Persian religion, not against the Persian nation — and the charges of Iranian dualist infiltration can be paralleled by similar tales of Jewish and Christian attempts to insinuate their own doctrines into Islam under the cover of Islamic heresy. It was in North Africa, Egypt, and Arabia that Shi'ism won its earliest and most resounding political successes. Only two of the important independent dynasties of Muslim Persia professed the Shi'ite religion. The first, the 10th-century Buyids, came from the peripheral and untypical Persian province of Dailam, by the Caspian Sea. Despite their Shi'ism they were willing to

preserve the Sunnī, Arab Caliphate, and their fall was followed by an effortless Sunnī restoration. The second, the 16th-century Safavids, were a Turkish-speaking family from the North West, relying on Turkish support and professing doctrines that stem from the religious ideas of Turkish Anatolia and Adharbaijan, not from Iran. Their success in forcibly imposing these doctrines on a country that was still predominantly Sunnī must be explained in terms of the moral and political condition of Persia in the 16th century. It has no bearing on the schisms and conflicts of earlier times.

The advance of knowledge and of understanding thus brought the abandonment of a theory which in any case had ceased wholly to satisfy. For the 20th century, in the West at least, the problems of nationality and national liberation were no longer the main themes of the historic process. The expansion and contraction of societies, the clash of interests and classes, economic change and social upheaval, class-war and cataclysm — these were the basic truths which the 20th-century historian saw in the mirror of history. Kharijism, Shi'ism, and the other movements in Islam were now interpreted in terms not of national but of social categories, not of race but of class. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the Russian progressive Barthold, the German conservative Becker, the Italian positivist Caetani, the French Catholic Massignon looked around them, and achieved a new understanding of the revolutions of early Islam — both of those that succeeded, and of those that failed.

At this point it may be useful to describe briefly the picture that Orientalist scholarship at present offers of the causes and phases of heresy in Islam. While there are certainly differences of opinion or interpretation on many specific issues, it is hoped that the current pattern of thought is in general accurately represented.

During the period between the death of the Prophet and the fall of the Umayyad Caliphate two main heretical groups developed, expressing in religious terms the opposition of certain parties to the existing social and political order and to the

orthodox faith that was its moral and public expression. One of these, the Kharijites, drew on largely Bedouin support, and expressed the resentment of the untamed nomads against the encroaching state — not so much against the Umayyad state specifically, as against the very fact and notion of the state, of a constituted authority exercising constraint and even coercion, and curtailing the total freedom of tribal society. The Kharijite theory of the Caliphate carries the doctrine of consent to the point of anarchy, and the Kharijites have indeed been described as the anarchist wing of the revolutionary opposition.

The second, and far more important opposition group was the *Shī'at 'Alī*, the party of 'Alī, commonly known as the Shī'a. This began as a political group supporting the claims of 'Alī to the Caliphate, but rapidly developed into a religious sect. As such, it reflected the outlook and aspirations of an important social class — the *Mawālī* (sing. *Mawlā*) — those Muslims who were not full members by birth of an Arab tribe. The greater part of these were the non-Arab converts to Islam. These were to be found especially in the industrial and commercial quarters which grew up around the garrison cities planted by the Arabs in the conquered provinces. Around the cantonments where the Arab warriors were stationed, new cities appeared, full of *Mawlā* craftsmen and merchants, purveying the growing and diverse needs of the conquerors, and thriving on the flow of gold brought by the conquests. Soon *Mawlā* soldiers themselves took part in the wars of conquest, while their superior skill and experience gave them a predominant place in the day-to-day administration of the Empire. Conscious of their growing importance, they became increasingly resentful of the economic and social disabilities imposed upon them by the Arab aristocratic regime, and rallied readily to a form of Islam that challenged the legitimacy of the existing Arab aristocratic state. Their aspiration was for an order in which all Muslims would be equal and Arab birth would no longer carry privileges. Their religious doctrines were adapted from their previous faiths; Judaeo-Christian and Persian messianism and legiti-

mism prepared them to accept the claims of the descendants of the Prophet, who promised to overthrow the Empire of tyranny and injustice and establish an Empire of equity and justice. Within the Shī'a camp there were two main trends — a moderate one, with much Arab support, and limited political objectives ; an extremist one, with mainly *mawla* support, and with revolutionary policies and tactics. The existing regime was Arab ; Persians were prominent among the revolutionaries, and some elements of racial conflict were injected into the struggle. But the *Mawālī* were by no means exclusively Persian ; many of them, including their leaders, were Arab, and the conflict was basically social rather than national.

The Abbasids rode to power on the crest of one of these religious opposition movements, and their victory was a social as well as a political revolution. In the first century of Abbasid rule the exclusive hegemony of the Arab aristocracy was ended, and men of many races found equal opportunity in a œcumenical, bureaucratic empire. Renouncing their disreputable revolutionary antecedents, the Abbasids strove to formulate and inculcate a new orthodoxy, no longer the tribal cult of a race of alien conquerors, but the universal religion of a universal empire. After some early and unsuccessful experiments with other religious ideas, the Abbasids eventually adopted the religion of the theologians, which in time became orthodox, Sunnī Islam. Orthodoxy was once more the religion of the state and the existing order, — and new heresies arose to meet the spiritual needs and material aspirations of the discontented. The first to oppose the Abbasids, their state, and their faith was the disappointed extremist wing of the movement that had brought them to power. Later, the great economic and social changes of the 8th and 9th centuries created new centres of discontent, especially among the artisans and workpeople of the swarming cities, and among the dethroned and dispossessed Arab tribes of the desert borderlands. These discontents found expression in a welter of small revolutionary sects, each with its own distinctive and rapidly evolving doctrines, each with its own local and sectional support. Most of these sects accep-

ted in one form or another the claims of the house of 'Alī, and are thus loosely classified as Shi'ite. By the beginning of the 10th century most of them had coalesced about one of two main groups. One of them, the Ithnā'asharī or Twelver Shī'a, continued the moderate, limited opposition of the early Arab Shī'a ; the other, the Ismā'ilī sect, resumed the interrupted development of the earlier extremist *Mawla* Shī'a. This second group carried through a successful revolution and established the Fatimid Caliphate, which ruled Egypt for two centuries.

By the 11th century social and political change in the East had once more created a revolutionary situation. The growth of feudal and military rule, accelerated and consolidated by the Seljuq invasions, brought massive upheavals. Arab and Persian landowners, dispossessed or subjugated by Turkish feudal lords, merchants ruined by the shortage of minted money and the withering of trade, bureaucrats chafing under the bridle of foreign military masters, all helped to swell the ranks of the discontented and rebellious. To these Isma'ilism, in a revived and modified form, brought a seductive doctrine of moral and political revolution, now associated with a new and effective strategy of attack. For a time the activities of the Ismā'ilī Assassins were subordinate to the Fatimid capital in Cairo, but soon, as the Fatimids themselves fell under the domination of their Turkish military commanders, relations between Cairo and the Assassins were broken off, and the latter were free to pursue their revolutionary ideas and policies uncontaminated by any links with state or empire. The Seljuqs were well aware of the danger, and endeavoured to meet it. As their soldiers guarded the bodies of their servants from Assassin daggers, so their theologians and teachers guarded the minds of their subjects from Ismā'ilī ideas. It is in this period that the *madrasa* appears — the theological seminary, founded as a centre for the formulation and dissemination of orthodox doctrine, to meet the Ismā'ilī challenge that came, first from the colleges and mission-schools of Fatimid Egypt, later from the Assassins' castles in the mountains. At the same time the religious genius of Ghazālī evolved a new form of orthodoxy, in

which the cold, flat dogmas of the theologians drew warmth and contour from the intuitive and mystical faith of the *Ṣūfīs*. The tide of popular piety, given new channels and new impulses, began to flow towards and not away from the schools and the dynasty — the nearest Muslim equivalents of Church and State.

By the time of the great Mongol invasions of the 13th century, extremist Shi'ism had ceased to be a vital force in Islam. Here and there, in remote fastnesses of mountain and desert, or isolated and immobilised amid alien surroundings, it dragged on an attenuated and fossilised existence. But in the main Islamic centres of the Near East, the theologians and the people, driven towards one another by the double shock of Christian and Mongol invasion, henceforth professed the same orthodox Sunnī religion. The same, that is, in its essential central doctrines, though still varying greatly in belief and still more in practice and organisation, from place to place and from class to class. Since the 13th century the religious history of Middle Eastern Islam has been chiefly concerned with the interplay of dogmatic religion and popular piety. Though the great synthesis of Ghazālī and his successors brought the two into communion, they remained distinct — sometimes in alliance, sometimes in conflict, always modifying and influencing one another by alternate clash and compromise. For the people, — as distinct from the State, the schools, and the hierarchy — the characteristic expression of religious life has remained, until our own time, the *Ṣūfī* brotherhood, with its mystical and ecstatic faith, its dervish saints and leaders, its latent hostility to the established theological and political order. Though the *Ṣūfī* orders in time became formally Sunnī and politically quietist, many of them remained suspect in the eyes of Sultāns and 'Ulamā' — and occasionally, as in the great revolt of the Ottoman dervishes in the early 15th century, the buried embers of discontent burst into conflagration.

The above summary of the genesis and evolution of Islamic heresy is obviously incomplete and necessarily schematic and personal. But it reflects broadly the findings of modern scho-

larship; and indeed, as truth is dealt with by historians, it is in all probability substantially true — that is to say, it represents as much as can be seen in the evidence at present available by the present generation of observers, though in the future new sources may yield greater knowledge, new experience bring deeper insight.

But what after all do we really mean when we say that such-and-such an interest or motive 'underlies' a religious movement — or, approaching from the opposite angle, that one or another sect or doctrine 'represents' or 'expresses' a social group or aspiration? Does it mean, as the cruder disciples of our time would have it, that scheming men made unscrupulous use of religion as a mask or cloak behind which they hid their real purposes from their deluded followers? Does it mean, in Marxist terms, that the sect is the 'ideological exponent' of the economic conditions and interests of a class — or, in the subtler language of Max Weber, that once an appropriate form of religion appeared in a certain stratum, the conditions of that stratum gave it the maximum chance of survival in the selective struggle for existence against other, less appropriate forms? The problem is of more than purely historical interest, since in our own day, in Persia, in Egypt and in other Islamic countries, great religious movements are stirring beneath the secularised surface; sects and creeds are replacing the wrecked parties and programmes that have never really responded to the needs and passions of the peoples of Islam.

It may bring us closer to an understanding of the meaning of heresy in Islam if we look at what the classical Islamic authors themselves said on the subject, and in particular examine the precise import of the various technical terms used.

It is curious, even astonishing, that among the very few loan-words of European or Christian origin used in modern literary Arabic are the words *hartaqa* — heresy, and *hurlūqī* (or *hurlīqī*) — heretic. This word first appears in the Christian Arabic literature of Syria, as far back as mediaeval times, and no doubt came by way of Syriac and the Eastern Churches. During the 19th century it began to pass into common Arabic

usage. At first it appeared chiefly in translations of Western books, and in Western, Christian, or non-religious contexts. But in our own day it is used by Muslim writers on Muslim history — not, admittedly, by those brought up on traditional theological lines, but by western-trained historians seeking to apply to their own history the principles and methods learnt elsewhere. Can it be that Islam, with its 72 and more named heresies, has no name for heresy, and is thus in the position of the Red Indian tribe which, we are told, has a score of verbs for different ways of cutting, but no verb to cut? Or is the notion of heresy in the Christian sense so alien to Islam that a loan-word was needed to describe it? There are in fact several Islamic terms which are rendered as 'heresy' by western scholars. They are by no means synonyms. Each has its own meaning, and none of them, as modern Arabic writers have found, can properly express that which in the Christian Churches is called heresy.

The first of these in order of appearance is *Bid'a*, meaning innovation, and more specifically any doctrine or practice not attested in the time of the Prophet. The term is thus the converse of *Sunna*. It is used currently by the early theologians, and even appears in the traditions attributed to the Prophet, who is quoted as saying that 'the worst things are those that are novelties, every novelty is an innovation, every innovation is an error and every error leads to Hell-fire'. In its extreme form this principle meant the rejection of every idea and amenity not known in Western Arabia in the time of Muhammad and his companions, and it has indeed been used by successive generations of ultra-conservatives to oppose tables, sieves, coffee and tobacco, printing-presses and artillery, telephones, wireless, and votes for women. It soon became necessary to distinguish between 'good' or licit innovations, and 'bad' or illicit innovations, the latter being such as were contrary to the Qur'ān, the Traditions or to the *Ijmā'*, the consensus of the Muslim community. This last meant in effect that the acceptance or rejection of an innovation was determined by what in modern parlance would be called 'the climate of opinion' among

the learned and the powerful, and that, since the climate of opinion changes, the *bid'a* of today may become the *sunna* of tomorrow, opposition to which is itself a *bid'a*. Moreover, since no machinery exists for the consultation or formulation of a universal *ijmā'* for all Islam, there may in fact be differing *ijmā's* influenced by different traditions and circumstances in different parts of the Islamic world, and the dividing-line between *sunna* and *bid'a* may thus vary with place as well as time. Islam has in fact absorbed a great deal that was foreign to the religion of the Companions, sometimes in concession to new ideas, sometimes by way of compromise with the existing practices of the peoples to which it came. But these innovations of doctrine and practice were always restrained and modified by the action of *ijmā'*, and from time to time drastically curtailed by a wave of religious conservatism. The gravamen of the change of *bid'a* levelled against a doctrine was not primarily that it was false or bad, but that it was new — a breach of habit, custom, and tradition, respect for which is rooted deep in the pre-Islamic tribal past, and reinforced by the belief in the finality and perfection of the Muslim revelation.

It will readily be seen that there are many contexts in which the word *bid'a* can reasonably be translated as heresy, but the two terms are far from being exact equivalents. Theological polemicists are ready enough to hurl accusations at those whose doctrines they disapprove of, but they are often reluctant to pursue their charges to their logical conclusion. Even so fanatical an opponent of all innovations as the Syrian jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) prefers a sort of quarantining of suspect groups and individuals, followed where necessary by admonition and even coercive action. Only when a *bid'a* is excessive, persistent, and aggressive are its followers to be put beyond the pale of the community of Islam.

The idea of excess is also expressed in another theological term — *ghuluww*, from an Arabic root meaning to overshoot, to go beyond the limit. Underlying this is the notion, deep rooted in Islam, that a certain measure of diversity of opinion is harmless, and even beneficial. 'Difference of opinion in my

community is an act of divine mercy', says a tradition attributed to the Prophet. The Holy Law of Islam is expounded in four versions, by four schools of jurisprudence, each with its own principles, text-books, and judiciary. All four are different, yet all are valid, and live in mutual toleration. Even Shi'ism was in its origin a *tashayyu' hasan* — a lawful partisanship, one not exceeding the limits of permitted disagreement — and only later left the common ground of orthodoxy. This almost parliamentary doctrine of limited disagreement and common basic assumptions, despite periods of eclipse, survives right through the history of Islam, and explains the mutual toleration of Twelver Shi'i and Sunnī in Abbasid Iraq, of dervish and 'ulamā in post-Mongol Islam. The followers of the four schools, and of some others that have disappeared, are all irreproachably orthodox. Even the Shi'ites, the Kharijites and others, though held to be in manifest error on important points of doctrine and Holy Law, were still Muslims, and enjoyed the privileges of such in this world and the next. Only certain groups, who carried their divergence to excess (*ghuluww*) are excluded from Islam. Such are the exaggerators (*ghulāt* — sing. *ghālī*) among the Shi'a, who in their veneration for 'Alī and his descendants ascribe divine powers to them, and are thus guilty of polytheism. Such too are the other groups of extremists among the Shi'ites, Kharijites, Murji'ites, Mu'tazilites, even among the Sunnīs, who deny prophesy, revelation, or Holy Law, or preach such doctrines as reincarnation, metempsychosis, or antinomianism. These, in the view of the majority of the theologians, are to be excluded from Islam — though, characteristically, opinions differ as to where the line should be drawn.

The term most commonly translated as heresy is *zandaqa* — the faith of the *zindīq*. This word is of uncertain origin — possibly Syriac, more probably Persian. In Sasanid times it seems to have been applied to Manichaeans, and more generally to followers of ascetic and unorthodox forms of Iranian religion. In Islamic times too the word was at first applied to Manichaeans and related groups, more especially to those who held dualist

doctrines while making nominal profession of Islam. Later it was generalised to cover all holders of unorthodox, unpopular and suspect beliefs, particularly those considered dangerous to the social order and the state. At the same time it was applied loosely to materialists, atheists, agnostics, and the like, and came to have the general meaning of free-thinker and libertine.

Despite its etymological obscurity and semantic vagueness, the word *zindīq* had, in another respect, a horrible precision. For unlike the other terms discussed, it belonged to administrative rather than theoretical usage. A charge of *bid'a* or *ghuluww*, uncomplicated by any act of overt rebellion, meant no more than being consigned by some theologian to Hell-fire. A charge of *zandaqa* meant being taken by a policeman to prison, to interrogation, perhaps to execution. The first recorded prosecution is that of Ja'd ibn Dirham, a forerunner of the Mu'tazila, who in 125/752, during the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Hishām, was condemned, mutilated, and crucified on a charge of *zandaqa*. Generally speaking, however, the Umayyads repressed only those doctrines that openly challenged their own title to the Caliphate. They were not greatly concerned with deviations from dogma as such, the less so since orthodox dogma was still in process of formulation.

The Abbasids were more keenly aware of the potentialities of seditious religious teachings. The repression of *zindīqs* began during the reign of Manṣūr, and some were condemned to death. The Caliph attached sufficient importance to this question to include an injunction to extirpate *zandaqa* in his political testament to his successor, Mahdī, under whom the really serious repression began. In 163/779, while passing through Aleppo, the Caliph ordered a *zindīq*-hunt, in which many were caught, condemned, beheaded and quartered. Thereafter the repression proceeded with vigour, and a regular inquisition was established, under the control of a Grand Inquisitor called 'Arīf or *Ṣāhib az-Zanādiqa*. There seems little doubt that among the many victims claimed by the inquisition under Mahdī and Hādī the Manichaeans provided the main bulk. But, as one would expect, the inquisitorial net caught other fish too. Some, like

the poets Bashshār ibn Burd and Šālīḥ ibn ‘Abd al-Quddūs, — both executed for *zandaqa* in 167/783 — were hardly more than earnest enquirers with inadequate respect for authority. Others, too numerous to mention, were good Muslims whose removal, for political or personal reasons, was deemed opportune by the Caliph, his ministers or his inquisitors. After the time of Hādī the direct threat of Manichaeism seems to have subsided, and the persecutions of the *zindīqs*, though they continue, are intermittent and on a smaller scale. At the same time the word *zindīq* loses its connotation of Manichaeism and dualism, and comes to be applied to any extreme or seditious doctrine — to some forms of Šūfī belief — or no belief at all. In legal parlance the *zindīq* is the criminal dissident — the professing Muslim who holds beliefs or follows practices contrary to the central dogmas of Islam, and is therefore to be regarded as an apostate and an infidel. The jurists differ as to the theoretical formulation of the point of exclusion, but in fact usually adopt the practical criterion of open rebellion.

More or less synonymous with *zandaqa* in its later, generalised application is the word *Ilḥād*, originally meaning deviation from the path. The word appears in this general sense in the Qur’ān, but was not part of the technical vocabulary of the earliest jurists and theologians. In the first few centuries of Islam the *Mulḥid* — deviator — is the man who rejects all religion, the atheist, materialist or rationalist of the type of the notorious Ibn ar-Rawandī. In this sense the word was misapplied by orthodox theologians, as a term of abuse, to a number of sects, and especially to the Assassins in Persia. By Mongol times it had become the common appellation of the Assassins, so that both Chinese and European visitors to Persia call them by it. In post-Mongol times, and especially in Ottoman usage, *mulḥid* and *ilḥād* tend to replace *zindīq* and *zandaqa* as the common terms for subversive doctrines among the Shī’īs, the Šūfīs, and elsewhere. In the 19th century an Ottoman historian used both *ilḥād* and *zandaqa* to describe the ideas disseminated in Turkey by the emissaries of the French Revolution (1).

(1) *Ta’riḫ-i Jevdet VIII*, p. 196 ff.

From the days when the seeds of Islam were first flung by the Arab hurricane on to the soil of many lands, strange flowers have often appeared in the garden of the faith—doctrines and practices that were aberrant, discordant, incongruous. Some of them were perhaps native growths in Arabian Islam—weeds and tares brought by the self-same wind of conquest. Others, the majority, were grafts and hybrids from alien stocks—beliefs and customs from pre-existing cults, foreign teachings from Plotinus, Mazdak and Mani, later from Voltaire, Rousseau and Marx. These were duly recognised and condemned by the guardians of the faith as innovatory, exaggerated, intrusive, and erroneous. Though they brought some modifications to the main stock and local sub-varieties of Islam, most of them were in the course of time quietly extruded by the action of the slowly evolving consensus of the Islamic community.

But how far do these amount to heresy in the strict, technical sense of the word? The Greek word ἀρεσις originally means ‘choice’, then a school or sect that represents the ‘choice’ of its adherents. Finally, in the Christian Church, it is specialised to mean a religious error, contrary to the truth as authoritatively defined and promulgated by the Church, and condemned as such by a competent ecclesiastical authority. By this definition, there has been and can be no heresy in Islam. As Goldziher says: ‘The role of dogma in Islam cannot be compared with that which it plays in the religious life of any of the Christian Churches. There are no Councils and Synods which, after lively controversy, lay down the formulae, which henceforth shall be deemed to embrace the whole of the true faith. There is no ecclesiastical institution, which serves as the measure of orthodoxy; no single authorised interpretation of the holy scriptures, on which the doctrine and exegesis of the Church might be built. The Consensus, the supreme authority in all questions of religious practice, exercises an elastic, in a certain sense barely definable jurisdiction, the very conception of which is moreover variously explained. Particularly in questions of dogma, it is difficult to determine in unanimity what shall have effect as undisputed Consensus. What is accepted as

Consensus by one party, is far from being accepted as such by another (1)'.

In the absence of an apostolic tradition and of a supreme pontiff, orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Islam could at first sight be determined only by making the teachings of one school the touchstone for the rejection of the others. The difficulties and absurdities of such a standard are well summarised by Ghazālī. Is Bāqillānī a heretic for disagreeing with Ash'arī, or Ash'arī for disagreeing with Bāqillānī? Why should truth be the prerogative of one rather than the other? Does truth go by precedence? Then do not the Mu'tazilites take precedence of Ash'arī? Because of greater virtue and knowledge? In what scales and with what measures shall the degrees of virtue be measured, so that the superiority of one or another theologian may be established?... 'If you are fair, you will soon realise that whoever makes truth the preserve of any one theologian is himself nearest to heresy... because he gives his master a rank that belongs only to the Prophet, considering him immune from error, so that orthodoxy consists in following him and heresy only in opposing him (2)'.

In this passage, the Arabic words translated as heretic and heresy are not any of those discussed above, but *Kāfir* and *Kufr*, unbeliever and unbelief. And with these terrible and unequivocal words we perhaps come nearest to an Islamic equivalent of heresy. The sectarian, though some of his doctrines may in time be excluded by the cumulative force of the Consensus from the main stream of Islam, is still a Muslim. In the eyes of the jurists, he is still entitled to the status and privileges of a Muslim in society — property, marriage, testimony, the holding of public office, even to treatment as a believer though a rebel, in insurrection and war. In the eyes of the theologians, he is a Muslim though a sinner, and may aspire to salvation in the life to come. The vital barrier lies, not between Sunnī and sectarian, but between sectarian and unbeliever. And unbelief, as Ghazālī observes, is a legal question, like slavery

and freedom, to be determined by legal rules and processes, and involving legal consequences (1). The excommunicated unbeliever is not only damned in the world beyond; he is outlawed in this world. He is deprived of all legal rights and barred from all religious offices; his very life and property are forfeit. If he is born a Muslim, his position is that of an apostate, a dead limb that must be ruthlessly excised.

In this as in so many other respects the practice of Islam was less severe than its theory. In theological circles, it is true, charges of unbelief were readily bandied about, and the word *kāfir* was part of the small change of religious polemic. 'The piety of theologians', observes Jāhīz' consists of hastening to denounce dissidents as unbelievers (2)'. Ghazālī speaks with withering contempt of those 'who would constrict the vast mercy of God to His servants and make paradise the preserve of a small clique of theologians (3)'. But in fact these loose accusations had no practical effect. The victims were for the most part unmolested, and many held high office — even legal office — in the Muslim state.

As however the rules and penalties of Muslim law were codified and brought into application, charges of *kufr* became rarer and rarer. The reluctance of jurists to condemn unbelievers was matched by a growing unwillingness among theologians to denounce them. There are two versions of the last words of Ash'arī, one of the greatest of Muslim dogmatists. According to the one, he died cursing the Mu'tazila. According to the other, his last words were: 'I testify that I do not consider any who pray towards Mecca as infidels. All turn their minds in prayer towards the same object. They differ only in expression (4)'. This statement, even if it be apocryphal, is a true expression of the attitude of Sunnī Islam to the problem of *takfir* — the denunciation or excommunication of the unbeliever. Many definitions were attempted of the basic minimum of

(1) Ibid, pp. 18-9; cf. *Al-Iqtisād fī'l-I'tiqād*, Cairo, n.d.' p. 111 ff.

(2) *Ḥayawān*, 1st ed. Cairo 1325, 1 p. 80. 2nd ed. Cairo, 1938, 1 p. 174, cf. Goldziher, *Vorlesungen*, p. 186.

(3) *Faiṣal at-Tafrīqa*, p. 68.

(4) Goldziher, *Vorlesungen*, p. 185-6.

(1) I. Goldziher, *Vorlesungen über den Islam*, 2nd ed. Heidelberg, 1925, pp. 183-4.

(2) Ghazālī, *Faiṣal at-Tafrīqa bain al-Islām wa'z-Zandaqa*, Cairo, 1901, pp. 10-18.

belief — but most inclined, in practice if not always in theory, to accept as Muslims any who testify to the unity of God and the apostolate of Muḥammad. This standard was the more acceptable to jurists, since the only religious transgressions for which the *Sunna* of Muḥammad prescribes the death-penalty are polytheism and the reviling of the Prophet. Outward performance is sufficient, according to a tradition of the Prophet, since God alone can judge a man's sincerity. Thinkers as diverse as the tolerant and mystical Ghazālī and the fanatical and puritanical Ibn Taymiyya agree in stretching the limits of Islam to the utmost. A dictum of the jurists lays down that in a trial for apostasy, any legal rule or precedent, even a weak one, which would give an acquittal must be followed. Even open rebellion did not automatically involve *takfīr*. In 311/923 the chief Qādī Ibn Buhlūl refused to denounce the Carmathian rebels as unbelievers, since they began their letters with invocations to God and the Prophet, and were therefore *prima facie* Muslims. The Shāfi'ī law insists that the sectarian, even in revolt, is entitled to be treated as a Muslim; that is to say, that his family and property are respected, and that he cannot be summarily despatched or sold into slavery once he becomes a prisoner. Only the most persistent and outrageous error or misconduct was condemned as *kufr*, or as the more or less equivalent crimes of *zandaqa* and *ilhād*. The accused was then summoned to recant and repent, and, if he failed to do so, was put to death. Some jurists refused the opportunity to recant, since the good faith of a *zindīq* could not be accepted.

All this does not of course mean that persecution of heresy was unknown in Islam. From time to time heretics were tried and condemned, with or without *takfīr*, and punished by imprisonment, whipping, decapitation, hanging, burning, and crucifixion. Inquisitions were rare, but the ordinary Islamic judiciary could be empowered to deal with the discovery and punishment of religious error. The suppression of *zindīqs* by the early Abbasids has already been mentioned. Under Ma'mūn a new inquisition, the *miḥna*, was used to impose the official Mu'tazilite doctrine; with the restoration of Sunnī orthodoxy

under Mutawakkil, the same means were used against the Mu'tazila themselves and against the Shi'a. Repression of dangerous doctrine continued sporadically under the Abbasids, the most striking being that of the extremist Shi'a. At the same time mystical teachings, the menace of which to the state was less immediately obvious, were kept under surveillance. In 922 the God-intoxicated Ṣūfī Ḥusain ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj suffered martyrdom in Bagdad for proclaiming his union with God, and thus endangering the established order in heaven and on earth. Two and a half centuries later the illuminist Suhrawardī suffered a similar fate in Aleppo. The Seljuqs used all possible means to meet the threat of the Assassins — Saladin stamped on the embers of the Ismā'īlī Fatimid Caliphate and compulsorily restored Sunnism in Egypt. In post-Mongol times the threat of Shi'ism had for a while subsided, and mystic and dogmatist were drawn closer by adversity. A few executions of individual Shi'ites are recorded in Syria under the Mamluks — most of them seem to be due to the deliberate provocations of would-be martyrs. In Turkey the growth of the Ottoman principality to statehood and empire constricted the erstwhile religious freedom and eclecticism of the frontier, and provoked the armed resistance of groups on or beyond the limits of orthodox tolerance. The Bektaşhīs, strongest among the mixed populations of Western Anatolia and Rumelia, made their peace with the Empire, and received tolerance and even favour. The Shi'a were mostly to be found among the Turcomans in Central and Eastern Anatolia, and thus had close affinities with the Shi'a Safavids who ruled Persia from the beginning of the 16th century. The Anatolian Shi'ites were thus potential or actual enemies of the state, and the Ottoman Sultans used both repression and reeducation to render them harmless. At the same time a far more effective repression was carried out in Persia, this time of Sunnism, resulting in its virtual extinction in that country. The one constant criterion was subversion. The followers of doctrines and practices which threatened the state, the dynasty, or the fabric of society were outlawed and repressed. Others — be they as remote from Islam as the

Nuṣairis, Druzes and Yazīdis — were accorded tolerance, and even allowed the name and status of Muslims.

It has been observed as a curiosity that the word religion does not occur in the Old Testament. This is not because the ancient Hebrews had no religion, but because they did not distinguish a separate part or compartment of their personal and public lives for which they might require this special term. Religion embraced the whole of life — man's dealings with his fellow men, with society and with the state, as well as his dealings with God. Even the simple, basic acts of working and resting, eating, drinking, and procreation were sanctified as the fulfilment of a divine command and a divine purpose. Islam too has no words to distinguish between sacred and profane, spiritual and temporal, for it does not accept or even know the dichotomy that these pairs of antonyms express — the cleavage and clash of Church and State, of Pope and Emperor, of God and Caesar. The Islamic state is in theory and in the popular conception a theocracy, in which God is the sole source of both power and law, and the sovereign His vicegerent on earth. The faith was the official credo of constituted state and society, the cult the external and visible symbol of their identity and cohesion ; conformity to them, however perfunctory, the token and pledge of loyalty. Orthodoxy meant the acceptance of the existing order, heresy or apostasy, its criticism or rejection. The same sacred law, coming from the same source and administered through the same jurisdiction, embraced civil, criminal, and constitutional as well as ritual and doctrinal rules. The sovereign was the supreme embodiment of the Holy Law, maintained by it, and maintaining it. Where Church and State are inextricably interwoven, so too are religion and politics, and religion provided the only possible expression, in public and social terms, of sustained opposition. Whenever a group of men sought to challenge and to change the existing order, they made their teachings a theology and their instrument a sect, as naturally and as inevitably as their modern western counterparts make ideologies and political parties.

Yet even this explanation, based on the local characteristics

of Semitic law and faith, cannot be more than partial. Beyond it lies a profounder relationship between heresy and revolt, one that is bound up with the ultimate meaning of religion in human life.

Bernard LEWIS
(London)

STVDIA ISLAMICA

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