

# HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

An Account of the Clergy and Priests of Islam,  
the Personnel of the Mosque and “Holy Men”

by

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE PERSONNEL OF THE MOSQUE

IN addition to the *khatib* who occupies the pulpit in Islam, there are other “clergy” who belong to the mosque. A very able and extensive article on the *Masdjid* (Mosque) in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, by Joh. Pedersen devotes an entire section to the *personnel* of the mosque. This alone would be a perfect reply to those who say there is “no priesthood in Islam”; for the list of mosque personnel is a regular hierarchy.

The special Friday service when the *khatib* preaches has already been mentioned. But on every day in the year mosques are open and prayers are said five times daily.

Each mosque throughout the vast world of Islam has its *Imam*. 32

The word goes back to the Koran itself, where it signifies a pattern or leader in religion (Surah 2:118; 17: 73; 25: 74). It was used in early days for the *Imam* or *Khalifah* of the Moslem people. Later it was used of a patron saint or theologian, e.g., Abu Hanifa and the other three *Imams* of orthodox Islam. The Shiah speak of their twelve *Imams* — a hierarchy of religious leaders that are far more sacred to them than the twelve apostles of the early church were to Christendom.

But here we speak of the ordinary *imam*. In the earliest days he was *imam* in holy war as well as in prayer. The Friday service could take place only under those qualified to conduct it; who could punish and impose duties (Makrizi iv, p. 7). He was appointed and paid by the local governor out of the mosque-treasury (*Bayt-al-mal*). He had to maintain order and was in charge of the divine services daily, but especially on Fridays (Pedersen).

In India, we are told that sometimes the *maulawi* who possesses the mosque pays the *imam* as his curate (Hughes, *Dict, of Islam*, p. 329). Hughes goes on to say, “The *Imam* or priest of the mosque is supported by endowments (*waqf*). In towns or villages there is a parish allotted to each mosque, and the people within the section can claim the services of their *imam* at marriages and funerals.”

It is true that a religious ceremony is not obligatory for marriage, but it is usual in Arabia, Egypt, and India. It consists of a confession (*istighfār*) by the *imam*, repetition of the creed, the joining of hands and a closing prayer (L. Bevan Jones, *Woman in Islam*, p. 82; Hughes, *Dict.*, p. 318). What more does a Christian priest do at a marriage ceremony?

Those who doubt the existence of clergy or priesthood in Islam should read Westermarck's two volumes on *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*. A reference to the index alone would show that even the Moslem school master (*faqih*) stands apart from the laity, receives the first-fruits, washes the dead, presides at funerals, performs the first sacrifice at the Great Feast, and inculcates the principles of Islam. All education is in his hands and all education is religious. Secular education came only after the French occupation. It is from such an exhaustive study as Westermarck's (see index for *Scribes and Shereefs*) that we learn how priest-ridden Morocco was, and still is.

While the *imam* conducts the marriage ceremony, it is the *qadhi* who leads prayers at funerals (Hughes *Dict.*, p. 58). The offices of *imam* and *qadhi* are not necessarily hereditary, but it is usual in Mohammedan countries for them to pass from father to son (*idem*). In China, where there are some ten million Moslems, the *imam* is called *ahung*, i.e., religious teacher.

In Dabry de Thiersant's standard work on *Le Ma-hometisme en Chine et dans Le Turkestan Oriental* (pp. 330-348), there is an entire chapter on the ministers of religion and servants of the mosque. While those interested in the Dutch East Indies, with over fifty million Moslems, will find details of the names given and functions assigned to the personnel of the mosque in Cabaton's article, Vol. I *Revue du Monde Musulmane*.

The importance and special functions of the *imam* in every Moslem community are indicated in scores of traditions. He must be the best Koran reader, an elder or presbyter (sheikh), must not assume office against the will of the people (parish); but, once chosen, his authority is clear. People must not even leave the mosque before he does. 33

The *imam* has the power not only to receive converts into Islam and welcome them, as is the case in Arabia and Egypt today, but also exercises the power of excommunication. As in Judaism, the apostate is "cast out of the synagogue" and it is the priesthood which cast him out. Klein, who resided in Egypt for many years, writes: "A Muslim who apostatizes is to be brought before the *imam* and called upon by him to give up his unbelief and return to Islam. If he does not recant he is to be killed." 34

Few are aware of the wide influence and power of the law of apostasy in Islam even today. Those who are interested will find sufficient detail in a monograph mentioned in the footnote.

At the two great religious festivals of Islam, the *imam* or *qadhi* presides at the public services and initiates the sacrifice and the proper prayer ritual (Juyn-boll, *Islamisches Gesetz*, p. 127; Herklot's *Qanoon-e-Islam*, pp. 261-269).

The ceremony of the *Haji* at Mecca opens with a sermon at the great mosque, by the *imam*, which all pilgrims must attend.

In how many ways the laity are instructed and led through the perplexing ritual of the *Haji* by the Moslem clergy (*muqaddam*), one may learn from Hurgronje's *Mekka* or Burton's story of his pilgrimage.

In fact every pilgrim or small company of pilgrims engages a *muqaddam* or guide on entering Mecca, not as a tourist might, to show the sights, but as religious prompter to teach proper conduct to the pilgrim.

In Morocco and elsewhere, at the 'aqiqa sacrifice for the newborn child, it is the *faqih* (mullah) who presides, slays the victim, offers an extraordinary vicarious prayer and receives his fee (*Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, Vol. II, pp. 391-397). We enlarge on this priestly function of the Moslem clergy later.

At circumcision, the *imam* has an important place in Turkey, Egypt, and among the Achinese (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Khitan, p. 958). He offers prayers and takes part in the procession and the family feast because the rite of circumcision is considered the act of reception into the religious community (Lane's *Modern Egyptians*).

The *qadhi* (or judge) holds a religious-political office and often exercises the functions of *imam* as well. In some Moslem lands he is appointed by the secular power even as is the case in some state churches of Europe. He alone is competent to give decisions in matters of *fiqh* (canon-law). He also determines the punishment in every case. 35

Every Moslem village from Morocco to China offers abundant illustration.

The local *qadhi* is the court of appeal, even for non-Moslems, in case of trouble. Because of a friendly *qadhi*, many a Jew and Christian in the Near East has escaped mob fanaticism. Those who say there is no priesthood in Islam should read Doughty, or go out as pioneer missionaries or travelers to Arabia, Morocco, or Central Asia. There they would soon experience the power of the priesthood.

Let a paragraph from Doughty suffice:

"The *imam*'s mind was somewhat wasted by the desolate Koran reading. I heard in his school discourse, no word which sounded to moral edification! He said finally — looking towards me! — 'And to speak of Aysa bin Miriam, — Jesu was of a truth a Messenger of Ullah; but the Nasara walk not in the way of Jesu, — they be gone aside, in the perversity of their minds, unto idolatry!' And so rising mildly, all the people rose; and every one went to take his sandals. The townspeople tolerated me hitherto — it was Zamil's will. But the Muttowwa, or public ministers of the religion, from the first, stood contrary; and this *imam* (a hale and venerable elder of threescore years and ten) had stirred the people, in his Friday noon preaching in the great mesjid, against the nasrany. 'It was, he said, of evil example, that certain principal persons favored a misbelieving stranger: might they not in so doing provoke the Lord to anger, and see that the seasonable rain was withheld?' (Vol. II, p. 369, Doughty, *Arabia Deserta*).

Dr. Duncan B. Macdonald gives the duties of the *qadhi* as follows:

“He examines into disputes brought before him and enforces his judgments; he names administrators of the estates of minors, the insane, etc.; he supervises the *waqf* property of mosques and schools in his district and inspects highways and public buildings; he watches over the executions of wills; he inflicts the due legal penalties for apostasy, neglect of religious duties, refusal to pay taxes, theft, adultery, outrages, murder; he can inflict the penalties of imprisonment, fines, corporal punishment, and death.” (Encyc. Brit., *Islamic Institutions*, Vol. 12, p. 713).

For ten years, from 1892-1902 in Bahrein, East Arabia, my friend and neighbor, the *qadhi*, Sheikh Jasim, exercised each and all of the above functions. I witnessed the amputation of hands for theft, the public execution of a murderer, corporal punishment for adultery, imprisonments, and high-handed appropriation of property at his behest.

The *qadhi* of every Arabian village and city is feared above all other men because of his religious authority.

It is true that when the ordinary, illiterate Moslem stands before God he is conscious of a personal relationship. For him, as for the average Protestant, “there is no priesthood” to intercede or offer sacrifice. But in his daily life and relation to society — a totalitarian society of Islam — he knows the power of the *qadhi* to make life intolerable, because of his learning, his multitudinous functions, and his popular religious prestige.

Even as the Roman Catholic priest in the confessional, so the *qadhi* in his daily *majlis* learns the secrets of the common people.

He has the power of attorney over orphans and imbeciles; he confirms or forbids marriage and divorce. For details one may consult L. Bevan Jones, *Woman in Islam* (1941) where we learn how the *mulla*, the *pir* and the *qadhi* dominate women’s life in India (pp. 56, 82, 83, 96, 155). And speaking, not of India but of Islam in general, Hendrik Kraemer states: “Just as in Hinduism, the mullah or sheikh is the director of the souls and minds of untold thousands. It is extraordinarily instructive to read in this respect the youthful reminiscences of Taha Hussein the brilliant Egyptian scholar.” 36

Dr. J. Christy Wilson, who spent many years in Persia, writes:

“In Iran, the mullahs are known by the white turban they wear. The size of this increased according to their rank until a *mujtahid* of high rank wears a turban that makes him stoop shouldered. These men are educated in certain schools and when they complete their education and are inducted into the office they have the white turban placed upon their head. I think it is quite the same as the special clothing worn by a priest.”

One may witness, in nearly every Moslem center from Morocco to China, that special dress for the Moslem clergy is not the exception but the rule; not of yesterday but of today.

Dr. Wilson goes on to say:

“The number of priests who are allowed to wear the white turban, the old abba or cloak, and the distinctive dress of this office was recently limited by government order and the number was very largely reduced, others were forced to conform to the new European dress. The priests who were acknowledged for a certain district or village were allowed to continue to wear the tunic, or long inner garment, the abba or outside cloak, and the white turban. Others not acknowledged by the government as holders of this office were not allowed to wear this dress and these men like doctors were required to show proof of where they had been educated and how they could claim the office of mullah.”

“Furthermore the government maintains a school of theology in Teheran which has been visited by the Shah and which prepares men for the priesthood. It is a regular part of the government educational system and is called a College of Theology ‘*Ilm Ilahi*.’ As to preparation, distinctive dress and functions it seems to me the Shiah clerics of Iran are quite as much priests or clerics as those of the various forms of Christianity.”

One distinctive mark of those who pose as clergy or religious leaders we must note in this connection.

The sacred color of Islam is undoubtedly green. The Moslem *hajji*, proud of his journey to Mecca, and the *seyyids* and *sherifs* who claim descent from the prophet, wear green turbans. Some darwish orders wear green robes. Mohammed himself used to wear a green *burdah*, upper garment (see references in Wensinck’s *Handbook to Tradition*, p. 46). This *burdah* became famous and was preserved for many centuries as one of the relics of the prophet (Relics of the Prophet Mohammed by Margoliouth, *Moslem World*, Vol. xxvii, p. 20 ff).

According to tradition (Koelle’s *Mohammed*, p. 383) Mohammed preferred white and green. He greatly admired green. His celebrated green mantle was four ells long. The poem called *Al Burda*, The Mantel, was composed because a miracle wrought by this mantle extols the prophet with almost divine attributes.

The banner raised for the Holy War in Islam is generally green, as by tradition was that of Mohammed. The curtains of the Kaaba, now black, were once green. The flags of Egypt, Persia and other Moslem lands have green as a predominant color.

We had looked in vain for the reason of all this, until a reference of Van Arendonk to the green robes of honor worn by *sharifs* (*Encyc. of Islam*) gave us the key. He says *they wore green in imitation or anticipation of the green robes of Moslem saints in paradise*. These are mentioned in the Koran. The root *khadra* (green) occurs only eight times.

It is used of trees and herbs, especially the reviving-green of springtime, thrice (22:63; 6:99 and 38:80). Twice it refers to the seven green ears of corn in Pharaoh’s dream (12:43, 46). But it is remarkable that all of the other references are to the color of the garments and the couches of delight in paradise (18:30; 76:21 and 55:76).

They read as follows:

“For them are gardens of Eden, beneath them rivers flow; they shall be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and shall wear green robes of silk and of brocade, reclining on thrones — pleasant is the reward and goodly the couch.”

And again:

“On them shall be garments of green embroidered with satin and brocade, and they shall be adorned with bracelets of silver, and their Lord shall give them pure drink.”

The last passage is even more explicit. It is taken from the close of Surah 55, which gives the fullest description of the Moslem paradise:

“In them maidens best and fairest . . . bright and large-eyed maids kept in their tents, whom no man nor *jinn* has deflowered . . . reclining on green cushions and beautiful carpets.”

To return from this excursus on the robes of the “clergy” to their various classes, we come to the *qass* and *qāri*. These also belong to the personnel of the mosque.

Sermons were not only delivered on Fridays by the *khatib*, but there were Koran-readers who chanted and had special seats in the mosques. In Baghdad, we are told, one mosque had twenty (Ibn Djubair, pp. 219-222). There were also clerics “lay-preachers” (*Qussas*); these were appointed to deliver edifying addresses or tell popular religious stories both in mosques and elsewhere (Goldziher, *Muh. Studien*, II: 161).

Macdonald gives a lengthy account of their origin and their religious influence:

“The *Qussas* gave to Islam its permanent type as one knows it today. Their spontaneous movement, preaching to the populace directly in rhymed prose, pointed with religious legend, was the first apologetic and catechetical of Islam” . . . “In Ramadhan the daily preaching in the mosques is still of this character” (Art. *Kissa*, Encyc. of Islam, pp. 1043-1044).

The *qāris* or Koran readers, used a special desk, *kursi*, shaped like a large camp-stool, sometimes with a seat. Those without seats were kept in a small circular cabinet. There are beautiful examples of these *kursis* in the Cairo museum and in some of the large Cairo mosques they are still used. They are portable, and at public readings of the Koran function exactly as a reading-desk does in churches at the left of the pulpit. Is this also borrowed from Christian usage? For there we have a reading-desk as well as a pulpit.

The *Muezzin*. This office was instituted by the prophet in the second year of the Hegira when *Bilal*, a Negro believer, was appointed to call Moslems to prayer. His apostolic succession covers three continents and thirteen centuries! About the year 1900, there were in the Mosque of the Prophet at Medina fifty *muezzins* and twenty-six assistants (Pedersen).

In the earliest period they were assistants of the ruler. Their function was threefold:

- The assembling of the people,
- The summons to the *imam* for prayer,
- The *iqamah* or announcement that prayer was about to begin.

The mosque in the early centuries was also the training ground for *jihad* warriors (Margoliouth, *Mohammedanism*, p. 76). Those who refused to hear the *muezzin's* call were whipped (Al Madkhal 111:4); as was still the case at Zubair, Arabia, 1902. This special whip, kept by the *muezzin* or other servant of the mosque, is called *dirrah*, also *saut* or *jaldah*. Hughes' *Dictionary* (p. 85) gives an illustration of the one used at Peshawar. There is a specimen of one I found used in a mosque at Hankow in 1933, in the Princeton Museum. 37

One is not surprised to learn, therefore, that from very early days the *muezzin* was also the *muhtasib* or public censor of morals (Pedersen). Dr. M. T. Titus specifies his duties in the organization of Sunni Islam. "He was clothed with authority to put down heretical teaching and to punish Muslims who neglected the five daily prayers or the fast of Ramadhan" (*Indian Islam*, pp. 69, 70).

The *muezzins* also summoned to night-prayers and special litanies (*Zikr*). They repeated the words of the *imam* from raised platforms, called *dikkas*, in all the large mosques of Syria and Egypt. "In other ways also," says Pedersen, "the *muezzins* could be compared to deacons at the service. The *khatib*, on his progress to the *minbar* at Mecca, was accompanied by them and girded by them with the sword."

The office was sometimes hereditary. They had guilds and received their regular pay from the religious treasury (*waqf*). The position they still occupy can be seen from the part they play in public processions (Hurgronje's *Mekka* II: 322, and Lane's *Modern Egyptians*).

Most astonishing of all is that these "deacons" in the church of Islam were at the outset acolytes to carry incense! The prophet had incense burned in the mosque at Medina (Lammens' *Mo'awiya*, p. 367, note 8).

'Omar followed his example, and his client 'Abdullah carried the censer to the mosque in the month of fasting. In Fustat, Egypt, incense was used in consecration of the Sakhras mosque. The consumption of incense in the mosques became very large, especially at festivals (Pedersen).

There were artistic brass vessels used as incense burners. In Java and China such incense-pots with Arabic inscriptions are still a part of the regular mosque furniture, and are in charge of the *muezzins*. I have specimens from China dating from the Ming dynasty (1490). So much for the personnel and the religious furniture of the mosque.

32. *The Moslem World*, Vol. XV, p. 197, where the sermon is given in full.

32. Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, p. 204. Cf. for example, South Africa. "As the outcome of the Cape Malay Association Conference, recently held at Cape Town, one of the resolutions agreed to was that the general executive be instructed to approach the Minister of the Interior with a view to getting his recognition to the appointment of a Chief and a Deputy Chief Priest for the Union. A deputation waited on Dr. Malan, who said that he was prepared to recognize such

appointments if the names of the priests appointed were submitted to him. In order to get the opinion of the Emaums on this question, the general executive summoned a meeting of all the Emaums in the Peninsula last Sunday in the Trades Hall, Pleinstreet, Cape Town. Forty-one Emaums attended.” — *Cape Times*, July 29, 1925.

33. Wensinck, *Handbook of Early Muhammadan Tradition*, pp. 109, 110.

34. Klein, *Religion of Islam*, p. 181. Cf. Zwemer's *Law of Apostasy*, ch. II and VI, where a full account of this law, its origin, and application is given.

35. Doughty, *Arabia Deserta*, Vol. I, p. 145. For a most illuminating picture of the *Qadhi* one must read Al Hariri's famous poem translated by Dr. I. Steingass, especially the 32d Assembly, pp. 37-58, where the great poet satirizes the skill of Canon-lawyers.

36. *Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, p. 282.

37. The later Jewish law prescribed scourging for ecclesiastical offences in which a whip was employed consisting of three thongs, one of ox-hide and two of ass's hide. The one used in the old Hankow mosque is of similar texture.

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