

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 TWELVE

THE MAHDIS AND NEW MESSIAHS

TOO complete this brief account of the religious leaders in Islam, we cannot omit mention of the strange periodic appearance in its history of those who arrogated or inherited still greater powers in things spiritual than any of the classes already mentioned.

The *mahdis*, common to both *Shiah* and *Sunni* Islam, are striking examples. So also are the *new messiahs* and *soi-disant* prophets who arose in more recent times from the ranks of the *'ulema*, to form new Moslem sects or dominate groups by their personalities and prestige. We will continue with them in order.

The literature on the *mahdi* in Islam is very voluminous. In 1885 James Darmesteter wrote *Le Mahdi depuis les origines de l'Islam jusqu'à nos jours*. While Goldziher, Margoliouth and Snouck Hurgronje have also written since that date. Their investigations are summarized by Dr. Macdonald in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*. The subject is of great importance because the doctrine of the *mahdi* and his appearance on the scene has produced political events of no small importance to Great Britain, France, and the Netherlands in their several colonial possessions and interests for more than a century.

Literally *mahdi* means a divinely guided one. The title is used of certain individuals in the past and also of an eschatological personage yet to come. The first four caliphs had the title and there are other instances where it was assumed by the pious and learned in the long history of Islam, Ali, Hussain, 'Umar II and others were called by that title even by Sunni historians. 77

But it is as an eschatological figure that the appearance of a *mahdi* brings disturbance in the world of thought and politics.

As Dr. Macdonald says: “Islam takes a very pessimistic view of human nature. Men always fall away from the faith. This will be so especially toward the end of the world . . . the ka'ba will vanish and copies of the Koran will become blank paper, and its words will vanish also from the memories of men. Then the end will come.” 78

It is with such a gloomy prospect of the latter days that some theologians have asserted “There is no *mahdi* but ‘Isaiah” When he, Jesus, returns from heaven, Islam will triumph and Jesus will rule according to Moslem law; will marry, beget children, and finally die, and be buried at Medina. 79

But the masses were not satisfied in times of political, social or moral darkness, with an eschatological Messiah of the distant future. They looked for a little millennium before the end. This is expressed in later traditions. Some one would arise of the family of Mohammed who would rule the Moslem world and ‘Isa would be his *imam* (Macdonald).

The later we go the more popular are the sources and the more extravagant is the picture of the new day introduced by the *mahdi*. When Moslems felt oppressed or humiliated by European rule, *mahdis* arose with banner and sword in hand. The *mahdi* of the Sudan, Muhammed Ahmed, born 1843, whose *khalifa*, successor fought the British and Egyptian troops with fire and sword, all the world knows. 80

During the last war a *mahdi* of Somali-land raised a similar fanatic revolt which cost much in life and money to suppress. Both of these *mahdis* and others like them in Sumatra, northwest India, and North Africa (see Goldziher) were politico-religious leaders who assumed large spiritual as well as temporal power. The *mahdi* of the Sudan, for example, even changed the call to prayer, substituted *jihad* (holy war) for the pilgrimage to Mecca, exercised totalitarian powers as military leader, and demanded absolute obedience (Dietrich, *Muhammed Ahmad*, in Encyc. of Islam).

The hidden *imam* of the Twelver Shiah sect is also called, *Al-mahdi* but his status is entirely different from the *mahdis* of the Sunnis described above. The spiritual station and prestige of these twelve *imams* is another story which belongs to Persian history.

One illustration is the eighth *imam*, Ali Ridha (765-818). He is one of the great saints of Shiah Islam and his mausoleum at Meshed has become a place of pilgrimage. 81

Many stupendous miracles are attributed to him and the third hour of the day is still sacred to his memory.

Of others in the list of eleven *imams*, similar stories and glories are related.

It is the theory of the hidden *imam* that gave birth in the nineteenth century to the Babi-Behai movement in Persia. *Seyyid* Ali Mohammed of Shiraz in June, 1844, proclaimed that he was the gateway (*bab*) to the knowledge of all truth. Born in 1821 he devoted himself to study and to ascetic practices at Kerbela. He went to Mecca on pilgrimage and on his return promulgated his new doctrine and revelation. He was imprisoned and afterwards released but on account of new opposition by the orthodox, executed by order of the government at Tabriz. His influence spread and his teaching was sponsored by ‘*Alt Nuri*, who called himself *Bahā-Allah*.

After an attempt on the life of the Shah, he too was imprisoned, exiled and died at Acre, 1892.

Abd-al-Baha succeeded him and under the name of Bahāism, this new offshoot of Shiah Islam spread across the seas to America. *Bahā-Allah* signifies “the Splendor of God,” and his followers have made the most of this title to exalt his merits and glory. Abd-al-Baha, his excellent son, inherited his spiritual authority. But there have been bitter quarrels for leadership.

Again the Ahmadiya movement in India with its new prophet-messiahs both at Qadian, where it started, and at Lahore, where it suffered division of an acute nature, is based not upon the parity of all believers before Allah, but upon *soi-disant* high priests and prophets of a new Islamic dispensation. All of these spiritual leaders came from Islam and claim to be Moslems.

In conclusion, we note, as another example, the spiritual headship and enormous power exercised on the part of H. H. the Agha Khan, G.C.S.I., G.C.V.O., G.C.I.E., high-priest of the Khoja community in India.

Born in 1877, he is perhaps the most remarkable figure in Moslem India today. There are only about 33,000 Khojas of the Ismaili sect who recognize him as their *imam* to the point of calling him also an *avatar*, incarnation of deity. But the American press at times absurdly states that “he is head of all the Mohammedans of India.”

The British *Who's Who* tells of his honorary degrees, his success in winning the Derby, and his writings in popular magazines. But to his followers he is a prince without the inconvenience of a kingdom, a descendant of the hidden *imam*, indeed the forty-seventh legitimate *imam* and in direct descent from Ali the son-in-law of Mohammed. His person is so sacred that once a year he is weighed on the scales and an equivalent in gold paid him as tribute! His followers yield him almost divine honors and his word is law to all his Khoja disciples. 82

When I traveled with him up the Persian Gulf some thirty years ago I was the incredible witness to certain abject superstitions regarding his healing powers.

No chasm between clergy and laity even in the middle ages, was ever more deep than that which exists between the ordinary Moslem believer and such high religious functionaries as described above, whether their office is hereditary or due to a new supposed revelation from Allah.

77. Goldziher, *Vorlesungen wher den Islam*, pp. 201-231; 268-269.

78. Encyc. of Islam, *Mahdi* by Macdonald.

79. Richard Hartmann, *Eine Islamische Apokalypse atts der Kreuzzugzeit*. 1924. It has a translation of an Arabic text on eschatology, Cairo, 1906. See also Zwemer, *The Moslem Christ*, pp. 107-109.

80. Slatin Pasha, *Fire and Sword in the Sudan*, 1896.

81. Encyc. of Islam *‘Ali Ridha*.

82. Moslem World, Vol. XX, p. 407. For further details see M. T. Titus, *Islam in India*, pp. 102ff.

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