

HEIRS OF THE PROPHETS

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

by

Samuel M. Zwemer, F.R.G.S.
Professor Emeritus of the History of Religion and Christian Missions
Princeton Theological Seminary

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE POWER AND INFLUENCE OF THE CLERGY TODAY

WE have seen in this brief study that historically these *khalifs*, *mahdis*, *seyyids*, *'auliya*, *sharifs*, *imams*, *faqirs*, *ahungs*, *mullahs*, etc., by whatever name called, exercise a ministry of prestige, education, intercession, or authority as regards other believers. They do constitute a special class functionally and are known by their dress and manner.

Webster's definition of priest applies to most if not to all of them: “One set apart or authorized to perform religious or sacred duties or functions such as rites, ceremonies or teaching; one who officiates at the altar or performs the rites of sacrifice; one who acts as a mediator between men and divinity or the gods of any religion” (*New International Dictionary*).

Such “priests” there are in Islam. This is not a strife about words, but a correction of a too common and widespread misunderstanding, sometimes due to an attempt at idealizing Islam. As we have seen, Islam was from the outset a military, totalitarian church-state.

“In the main, then,” says Margoliouth, “the original Moslem system was to make its adherents soldier-priests, i.e., to combine the sacerdotal with the warrior caste.” 83

An Indian missionary, Dr. M. T. Titus writes in a letter:

“While it is true that Islam's priests and clergy have not been consecrated or ordained in the spiritual succession of the founder, nonetheless they are authorized, appointed or set apart to perform the same or similar functions in a way or manner peculiar to Islam. Since, therefore, these recognized religious functionaries perform the same duties as the priests and clergy of the church, we may well hold that the old formula that things equal to the same thing are equal to each other holds here as well as in mathematics!”

His able monograph on *Indian Islam* has chapters on the present day religious orders of Islam, on present day saint-worship and its persistence; he also tells of the reactionary movements in spite of the progress in education and reform. 84

In Turkey, Iran and Egypt there have been various reform movements, some almost revolutionary in character. Education has greatly changed manners and customs. The Caliphate has been abolished. The old Moslem laws were in many cases superseded by new western codes. But in no Moslem land so far have the clergy (*'ulema*) been abolished, although their prestige may have suffered. What is their present influence and authority?

Although Islam never developed any institution entirely similar to the clergy of Christianity, it had from early days and has now three religious classes quite comparable to "priests" and "clergy."

- The one class, as we saw, are appointed for public worship and preaching.
- The second are theologians and masters of canon-law.
- The third class are hereditary saints and holy-men.

They together still form a very large percent of the population. All have prestige, receive honors, and their emoluments are from alms or the religious treasury. No priest or clergyman in Christendom is more duly "authorized to be a minister of sacred things or perform on behalf of the community certain public religious acts," or has more power over the laity.

Therefore, to understand the mind of the masses, their inertia or their fanaticism, their attitude to life and their ethics, one must become acquainted at first hand with these three classes of spiritual leaders.

In the last analysis, they control the pulpit, the popular press, the education of youth and womanhood in so far as it is illiterate and still religious. The rise of nationalism, constitutional government, and the impact of secularism, has not altogether destroyed Islam as religion of the heart.

The fall of the Caliphate was a severe blow but it was not the end of Islam even in Turkey. Hurgronje believes that Islam never regarded the caliph as its spiritual head.

"The spiritual authority in Catholic Islam reposes in the legists, who in this respect are called in a tradition, *'the heirs of the prophets.'* Since they could no longer regard the caliphs as their leaders, because they walked in worldly ways, they have constituted themselves independently beside, and even above them." 85

Therefore, the political decay of Islam in our day, the increasing number of Moslems under foreign rule, the rise of a secular nationalism and modernism only serve to emphasize the fact that "the clergy and priesthood" are the custodians of whatever remains of the spiritual heritage of Islam.

They exercise this power of custody first of all in the realm of dogma. The theological schools are the defenders of the faith, the centers of Islamic propaganda and unity. This is not only notoriously the case of Al Azhar in Cairo but is true elsewhere. In India, Dr. Titus tells us, the religious colleges control the thinking of the masses and the *'ulema*, never before organized, have now a central organization, *Jamiyat-ul-'Ulema-i-Hind*. It has annual conferences and headquarters at Delhi.

“Today the ‘*ulema* are better organized and consequently it is becoming possible for them to make their influence felt more widely than in the past.”

They have enormous influence, also, in education from the mosque primary school to the best Moslem colleges. 86

And we must remember that in Islam secular education of youth is to the orthodox an offence. The short final chapters of the Koran are still used as primer for youth in 90 per cent of the Moslem world, where the village schoolmaster teaches. The most recent testimony to the power of the ‘*ulema* comes from India, with a Moslem population of ninety million.

Wilfred C. Smith speaks of the gulf between the ‘*ulema* and the modern educated Moslem but says, “The mosques and those that attend them are still under the feudal ‘*ulema*.” Such Moslem seminaries as Deoband have an enormous influence throughout India through the large number of *mawlawis* (teachers) they send out everywhere.

Next to Al Azhar in Cairo, this school is the most important in the world of Islam.

It stands “for rigid orthodoxy and unmitigated scholasticism.” Yet its “implacable enmity to bourgeois society and to its depredations” has made it an important ally of anti-British politics. The ‘*ulema* everywhere also exercise power through the religious and secular press. 87

Both in defence of the old and in reform for the new, the ‘*ulema* are those who everywhere wield the pen. It is therefore increasingly important to cultivate friendly relations with the large and influential body of editors and journalists in the great centers of the world of Islam.

“Fleet Street may well envy the young Afghan editors,” said *The Times of London* some years ago, “it is the golden age of journalism when a nation is beginning to think and truth is as fresh as dew, and there is no bugbear of banality.”

The printing presses are active and alert. And the press is at once a proof of the unity and solidarity of Islam in every crisis, as it is also an infallible index to the surging currents of thought in a sea of unrest.

In post-war days, as before, the press of Cairo, Damascus, Constantinople, Calcutta, and Kazan will be a thermometer and barometer for the careful observer, to indicate rising temperature or approaching storm of political or social unrest.

There too, we may read the “set fair” of mutual tolerance and diplomatic adjustment.

To know the press is to know the people.

For the people of Islam still follow religious rather than secular leadership. Even their national extremists must wear the robe of Islam to obtain a strong following. This has been true in the past and is now.

As Dr. Kingsley Birge writes:

“In the early days of the Turkish national state, the leader, then called Gazi Mustafa Kemal, defended his reforms in terms of religious precedents and Islamic principles. The pictures of the National Assembly in those days showed a sprinkling of white turbans, indicating that religious leaders were prominent among the political crusaders for the new era.”

This remarkable statement occurs in an article on Secularism in Turkey and its meaning. 88

And the writer after sketching the account of all the reforms and the drastic changes in the new republic, economic, social, and religious — most of which led to a “weakening of ecclesiastical authority” — states that “secularism has gone farther than in any country of the modern world except pre-war Soviet Russia.”

Nevertheless no people can live without religion and “today the Office of Religious Affairs is seeking ways and means of reviving a trained Islamic ministry.”

Social pressure is still brought to bear on people to adopt Islam even though it be of a syncretistic variety. This new trained Islamic religious “ministry” will still be “clergy” to the laity and will doubtless have functional authority.

Add to all this the undoubted fact that the darwish orders, although suppressed in Turkey, are not defunct. Elsewhere they are still widely prevalent and that saint-worship, hero-worship and miraculous cures on the part of popular saints are not a thing of the past even in the New Republic of Turkey.

It is for all these reasons that the clergy and priesthood of Islam demand the respect of those who desire to help the masses or have dealings with them. This applies to tourists, orientalists, political officials, and merchants no less than it does to missionaries.

It applies most of all to the latter because it is from among the clergy of Islam that opposition often arises, and also some of the strongest and most distinguished Christian converts have come from this very class both in the Near East and in India ever since the days of Henry Martyn.

83. *Mohammedanism*, pp. 76-79.

84. *Indian Islam*, 1930. Oxford Press, pp. 110-144.

85. Hurgonje’s *Mohammedanism*, pp. 113-116.

86. *Indian Islam*, pp. 75 ff

87. For India, see *Islam in India*, pp. 203-206, 243-247. Cf. Zwemer, *Present Day Journalism in the World of Islam* in John R. Mott’s *Moslem World of Today*.

88. *International Review of Missions*, Oct., 1944, pp. 426-432.

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