

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 ONE

INTRODUCTION

ACCORDING to the Century Dictionary, a priest is primarily "one who is duly authorized to be a minister of sacred things; one whose stated duty it is to perform on behalf of the community certain public religious acts, particularly religious sacrifices." And, in a secondary sense, "a priest is one who is ordained to a pastoral or sacerdotal office; a presbyter; an elder" (see also the Encyclopaedia Britannica, xiv ed., Art. Priest).

As for the word clergy, it is derived from *clerk* and although used now, in distinction from the laity, for a body of men set apart for the public worship of the church, its original meaning was a cleric or clerk, a learned man, one who could read (Chaucer). In fact Webster defines clergy, "The priesthood or body of adepts of any religion." He defines *imam* as "the priest who performs or leads the regular service in a Mohammedan mosque," so much for etymology.

Every religion has had its clergy or priesthood by whatever name called; no one denies that there were Jewish priests and Levites, or that there are Hindu priests and Buddhist priests.

In the Old Testament, priestly functions were exercised from the earliest times by the patriarchs. The organization of the Levitical priesthood also indicates their general functions in the Tabernacle and afterwards in the Temple; namely, to minister in the sanctuary, to teach the people the law of God, and to inquire for them the divine will by Urim and Thummim. The priesthood continued after the captivity, and wherever the Jews were dispersed they had special Levites, Rabbis, etc. The Christian church from its earliest organization had apostles, prophets, teachers, bishops, presbyters, and deacons.

Islam had its rise in a Jewish-Christian environment, and where Mohammed borrowed so much, we might expect that he would also borrow much of the organization of his new faith from these sources. Whether he did or not, Islam today undoubtedly has clergy and priesthood although not called by these particular terms. But this has been denied and a curious opinion to the contrary has arisen.

Dr. Zaki Ali, an Egyptian Moslem, writes: "Islam has no clergy nor church organization, and the office of priesthood is rejected altogether. Any Muslim may suffice to conduct the ritual, and none is invested with sacred character. The theologians are merely those who know the Divine Law; they do not compose a clerical caste." 1

Another, writing of Persia, states: "The mosque is tended by no sacred priesthood as are the temples farther east, and to a less extent, the churches of the west." 2

Still more definite is the recent statement of Dr. William Thomson: "Unlike Christianity, then, Islam did not found a church with an independent constitution and a recognized relationship to the state . . . And it devised no interpretative authority . . . Like [modern] Judaism, if for a different reason, Islam has no priesthood. A class of religious officials arose, indeed, as a result of a felt need, preaching sheikhs, Koran reciters, imams, or leaders in prayer, and muezzins. But these officials do not form a closed profession. They have no especial obligations. They are not guides and keepers of the public conscience. They are seldom teachers of the young. Their functions can be performed by any other Muslim just as well, and they themselves are free to adopt any other business or profession; for there is no bond of consecration, no ordination that joins them with the founder of their faith in a spiritual union. All believers are equally priests, or there are none." 3

Dr. Thomson's statement is true only in the sense that Islam has no priests "who have authority to administer sacraments or pronounce absolution" (*Oxford Dictionary*).

The clergy in Islam and its priesthood are Protestant rather than Roman Catholic in their authority and function. But it is the clergy who are "the guides and keepers of the public conscience," who "teach the young" everywhere from the village mosque to the great theological universities in Fez, Cairo, Constantinople, Kerbela, and Qum. The proof is given in what follows.

Indeed there is even sacrifice in Islam, but since the Koran denies the Crucifixion and the Atonement there is no altar nor mass, although the *mihrab* in every mosque is an imitation of the altar niche in churches (Becker, *Islam Studien*, p. 493), and is the place toward which all worshippers prostrate themselves, led by the *Imam*. Becker states that even as the moslem pulpit (*mimbar*) is an imitation of the Christian pulpit, and the *minaret* dates back to the church-tower, so the niche (*mihrab*) in the direction of Mecca dates back to the apse. "*Es wird also mit dem Mihrab nicht nur eine neutrale Bauform übernommen, sondern eine kultische Institution!*"

Now it is generally admitted that Islam is totalitarian, as was pointed out by Dr. Charles R. Watson and Dr. E. E. Calverley. 4

But how can a system in church or state be totalitarian without an organization to enforce its will? How and when, did Islam become such? Writing of the caliphs of Baghdad; Osborn remarks:

“Church and state are so completely identified that the religious life is made subject to the supervision of the courts of law; and the constitution of society and the government is supposed to be the result of a series of divine enactments. All spiritual development is treated as a crime against society and punished accordingly.”⁵

In fact, part one of his study of early Islam is even entitled *The Church of Islam*, and he devotes two chapters to an account of “this inflexible theocracy.”

But a totalitarian system needs authoritative power to enforce its claims. We hold that from the days of Omar at Medina to those of the sheikhs of Al Azhar in modern Cairo, it is the clergy, the priesthood of Islam, that have been the legislative, judicial, and executive departments of this church-state which some have even called the democracy of Islam.

Let us go back to the beginnings of this “inflexible theocracy.”

1. *Islam in the World*, p. 21. So also the *Sheikh-al-Islam* to Dr. Dwight, *Constantinople and Its Problems*, p. 59.
2. Elgin Grosedose in *The Persian Journey of Rev. Ashley Wishard*, p. 118.
3. *The Moslem World*, Vol. 33, pp. 100 and 101.
4. *The Moslem World*, Vol. XXIX, pp. 325-364ff.
5. Osborn, *Islam under the Caliphs of Baghdad*, p. 71. So also Lammens in *Islam: Beliefs and Institutions*, p. 94. “The ‘Ulema are the heirs of the prophets.’ They decide spiritual issues. “The masses have nothing to do with these questions.”

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