

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 THREE

PRIESTHOOD OF MOHAMMED AND THE EARLY CALIPHS

NOW where did authority rest when Islam, under the first four caliphs, sprang from its cradle in Medina?

- Who instituted the *masjid* (mosque) and the *minbar* (pulpit)?
- Who appointed the first *muezzins* to call to prayer? *khatibs*, to preach? *imams*, and *qadhis*, to exercise authority?
- What is the origin of the Islamic hierarchy and of its monastic orders of *darwishes*?
- When did the royal Quraish family first assert its prerogative of hereditary prestige, perpetuated to this very day in ten thousands of *seyyids* and *sherifs*?

All of these questions are related to the spiritual functions and claims of Mohammed and the early caliphs. Priesthood is not a matter of etymology (priest, presbyter, sheikh, elder; all have the same significance) but of actual spiritual or temporal power over those who acknowledge its function. The religious and political development in Islam went hand and hand.

In the course of the first century, the Koran readers (*qaris*) arose, and these were succeeded by the men of tradition (*ahl-al-hadith*), by canonists (*faqih*s) and other learned men who held office.

“They laid claim to an interpretative authority concerning the divine law which bordered upon supreme legislative power; their *ijma* (agreement) was that of the infallible community.” 9

“The four earliest caliphs,” says Macdonald, “were very happily called *ein Monchischen Imperium*, by Sachau. After this original 'monkish empire' the first Abbasid Caliph appointed his first vizier or helper; as Aaron, the priest in the Koran is called the *vizier* of Moses” (*Mohammedan Institutions* in Ency. Brit., 14th edition).

We have seen that the pre-Islamic *kahins* had certain prerogatives and functions. Now each of these find place in the life of Mohammed after he had proclaimed his message as the apostle of Allah.

1. The *kahin* was custodian of the sacred shrine, and when Mohammed entered Mecca as conqueror, the central Arabian shrine was cleansed of idolatry with the exception of the Black-Stone put in place by Mohammed himself in his pagan days. Now as prophet-priest Mohammed directed the ritual of the Islamic pilgrimage for all time by his observance of it as conqueror.

2. The *kahin* in pagan days gave out oracles in rhymed prose. The earliest chapters of the Koran are very similar in form and content (Wellhausen).

3. The *kahin* was a soothsayer whose imprecations and benedictions were supernaturally effective. It was Mohammed's curse on an Arab tribe guilty of injuring his camels that was the origin of the *qanut* or brief imprecatory prayer used by every Moslem at the close of the regular prayer (*salat*) (Zwemer, *Influence of Animism on Islam*, p. 57). Margoliouth tells of a late convert to Islam in Mohammed's day "who remembered seeing him on a high place at Taif leaning like a *kahin* on a staff or bow and reciting Surah 86" in which there are strange oaths of asservation (*Mohammed*, p. 179).

4. The *kahin* could offer special prayer for rain and bring it down from heaven in dry and thirsty Arabia. Here again Mohammed exercised his priestly power. He taught a special prayer and ritual for rain-making (*istisqa*) by turning his garment inside out and lifting his hands, etc. (Wensinck, *Handbook of Muhammedan Tradition*, pp. 201-202).

5. As in the case of pagan *kahins*, his garments, hair, saliva and touch had healing power. There are many traditions to this effect. One may also find numerous references to Mohammed as physician in popular books called *Tub-an-nabawi*. There are many orthodox traditions that tell how he could heal by blowing, by his saliva, by the water he used in ablution and how he healed men and cattle by the stroke of his hand. One man whom he stroked lived one hundred and twenty years (see Wensinck who gives the references to each of these Traditions, pp. 166-168).

But Mohammed and his successors claimed far higher powers and authority than those exercised by the priests and soothsayers of pagan Arabia. Mohammed called himself the Apostle of God, the final messenger in the long line of apostles and prophets.

After Mohammed's flight to Medina, he began to associate his own name with that of deity in a way not used by him in the earlier revelations. He now dares to say "Obey God and his apostle." The actor and the drama change from this time on. The *kahin* of Mecca who was a preacher and warner, now becomes an autocratic legislator and leader of a band of warriors.

He who suffered persecution at Mecca, now persecutes his Jewish neighbors.

He builds a new mosque with huts for his numerous wives, sends out expeditions, and finally, after two celebrated battles, enters his birthplace, Mecca, as a conqueror. He writes letters to foreign kings and princes inviting them to embrace Islam — that is, to submit to Allah and to Mohammed his apostle.

Margoliouth's *Life of Mohammed* is based on original Moslem sources, and he describes how the demoralizing of Mohammed's own character by his assumed prophet-priest-apostleship took place.

“When he was at the head of a robber community (in Medina) it is probable that the demoralizing influence began to be felt; it was then that men who had never broken an oath learned that they might evade their obligations, and that men to whom the blood of the clansmen had been as their own began to shed it with impunity in the cause of God; and that lying and treachery, in the cause of Islam, received divine approval, hesitation to perjure oneself in that cause being represented as a weakness. It was then, too, that Moslems became distinguished by the obscenity of their language. It was then, too, that the coveting of goods and wives (possessed by unbelievers) was avowed without discouragement from the prophet.” 10

With all his faults, which are not at all concealed or even apologized for in the Moslem sources, Mohammed's genius for leadership and his message won their way. Before his death, his word was law in all Arabia and the sword and book of the prophet began their world-conquest.

The four caliphs, who took leadership after Mohammed's death, succeeded to his power in temporal affairs and added to his prestige in the spiritual realm. Slowly but surely his apotheosis began and a new ideal apostle of God became the head of a world-wide theocracy.

In the Koran and in the earliest sources Mohammed is thoroughly human and liable to error.

Later tradition has changed all that, and made him sinless and almost divine. The two hundred and one titles of honor given him proclaim his apotheosis, and orthodox tradition establishes the claim. He is called Light of God, Peace of the World, Glory of the Ages, First of All Creatures and names yet more lofty and blasphemous. Tradition makes him both the sealer and abrogator of all former prophets and revelations, which have not only been succeeded, but also supplanted by Mohammed. No Moslem prays to him, but every Moslem daily prays for him or seeks his intercession in endless repetition. To them he is the only powerful intercessor on the day of judgment.

The inscription that surrounds a Persian portrait of Mohammed with lance and sword and surmounted by a nimbus of cherubs, reads as follows:

“Oh, Allah, bless and prosper the illiterate prophet, the Arabian, the Hashimite, the Quraishite, the man of Mecca and Medina, the Hero in battle of Tihama, the Pearly Star, the Possessor of dignity and gravity, the One buried in the soil of Al Medina, the Servant aided (with miracles), and the rightly guided messenger, and the elect one, the most glorious, the praised, the most praiseworthy, the father of Qasim, Mohammed son of Abdullah, the blessing and peace of God be upon him.”

“Mohammed during his lifetime,” says Macdonald, “ruled his people as a divinely inspired and guided prophet. He led the public prayers; he acted as judge; he controlled the army. Upon his death a leader was put in his place of similar authority, though without the divine prophetic guidance.”

This successor, Abu Bekr, was the first *khalifah*. He was absolute ruler of the Islamic theocracy, although elected, as were Arab chiefs at that time.

What were the prerogatives and duties of the caliphs? Let Macdonald tell us.

“They were to maintain the divine ordinance; to enforce legal decisions; guard the frontiers and equip armies; receive the alms; put down highwaymen; maintain the Friday services and the festivals; decide disputes and receive evidence on legal claims; marry minors, male and female, who have no guardian; divide booty” (*Islamic Institutions*, Encyc. Brit., Vol. 12, p. 713).

With such a complex of martial, legal, spiritual, and social prerogatives claimed at the outset, it is no wonder that the caliphate became a powerful and mysterious force in the history of Islam.

Is it surprising that this institution which perpetuated and emphasized such prerogatives, grew more and more religiously totalitarian? It was not, as Lord Curzon remarks, “a state-church but a church-state.”

In this church, religious endowments, *waqf* (mortmain) waxed larger and larger and tended to absorb the greater part of the national wealth. The power of the caliphate went further in its religious control and domination, until even an inquisition (*mihnd*) existed for nearly two decades under Al Ma'mun in Baghdad, with torture and capital punishment for those who denied the creation of the Koran! (W. M. Patton: *Ahmad b. Hanbal and the Mihna*. Leyden, 1897).

On the power of the ‘ulema (clergy) in general, D. B. Macdonald says, “It is plain that their organization was the solid framework of permanent government behind the changing dynasties (in the history of Islam). They had the ultimate decision on all questions of constitution, law and theology” (Art. ‘Ulema in *Encyc. of Islam*).

Now even as Arabia is the cradle of Islam, the mosque is the cradle of the clergy. It was that in the first century of Islam at Mecca, Medina, and Damascus. It is that today in Cairo, Kerbela, and Bokhara. The first chair of the ‘ulema was the *minbar* or pulpit.

Not only was the mosque the place of prayer but in the old days of Islam the mosque was the fitting scene for all the chief concerns of Arab life. “Here,” remarks S. H. Leeder, “an important journey had its start and finish; in those days a man's camel knelt by instinct at the door of the mosque.” 11

9. Hurgronje. *Mohammedanism*, p. 97.

10. D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*. New York and London, 1905, p. 149.

11. *The Veiled Mysteries of Egypt*, p. 36.

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