

A PATTERN OF REVIVAL MOVEMENTS IN ISLAM?

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THE course of Islamic History would seem—at least to an outsider—to present a dilemma to the believer. If society at the time of Muḥammad (and possibly of the first four caliphs) was the embodiment of the ideal, how could the ensuing period of time until the day of judgement be interpreted? Any change could logically be only for the worse, and this message of despair is given expression in the *hadīth* ascribed to the Prophet: ‘The best generation is mine, the next best that which follows and the next the succeeding one . . .’. While this doctrine sanctified the position of the early generations it could give little comfort to later ones. One source of comfort for the popular mind (apart, perhaps, from a recourse to more extreme forms of Sūfism) was the idea of the appearance of a *mujaddid* or a *mahdī* who would restore what had been lost and recreate what had once existed. Reformers who arose generally put their message in these terms and, in a way, they had no choice but to do so. The early reformers thought of reform in terms of Islam itself and had not yet to face the challenge of European thought. Whether it was ever possible to re-create early Islamic society or whether it ever was as they pictured it are irrelevant questions. The important fact is that these are the terms in which their messages were framed.

In this article¹ I want to discuss the form which religious or socio-religious protest took in three Arab countries during the late eighteenth, the nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. It is not based on original research but it is an attempt to draw a synthesis from the works of others² and to discover whether the three movements concerned, the Wahhābiyya, Sanūsiyya, and Mahdiyya, followed similar or divergent paths and whether it is possible to set up a model or ideal type. There

¹ Originally given as a seminar paper at the Middle East Centre of St. Antony's College, Oxford. The theme of a series of seminars was whether it is possible to make general statements about the path of development, economic, political, cultural, or religious, followed by the Muslim or Arab world or whether it is best to take each country separately and explain what happened in terms of factors peculiar to itself.

² I am particularly indebted to the following works: P. M. Holt, *The Mahdīst State in the Sudan, 1881-1898* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1970). E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Sanusi of Cyrenaica* (Oxford, 1949). G. Rentz, ‘Ibn ‘Abd al-Wāhhāb’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edn., London-Leiden, 1960-). I have also used N. Ziadeh, *Sanusiyah* (London, 1958) and Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (London, 1966).

are various aspects of the process to be studied: the method by which the original protest arose, the course it followed, the character of the leaders of protest, how the religious community was transformed into a state, how it met external challenges, and how the succession was managed.

The Islamic state in its ideal form is a theocracy, in which sovereignty derives from God and which is administered solely according to the precepts of the divine law. The ruler has the duty of upholding the law and of so ordering society that the Muslim citizen may live his life without constraints imposed by irreligious demands, a life in which there is no distinction between the religious and the secular. The cohesive force and the basis of society is religion; the ruler is responsible to God, the people obey the just ruler. The Muslim *umma* embraced both 'church' and state and men looked to the early Islamic community as their pattern. Of course, the ideal rarely exists and pious Muslims had to face the fact of unjust rulers and of the seizure of authority by secular leaders. With remarkable tolerance, and with some acceptance of the inevitable, the community came to regard an unjust ruler who preserved order as preferable to a condition of disorder in which the very practice of religion was at stake.

However, if men were driven to dissent, to a political dissent possibly arising from social causes, it often acquired a religious character. On the other hand, religious dissent often assumed a political colouring—notable examples being the Khārijites and the Assassins. Organized dissent took a theology as its ideology and a sectarian form as its organization. In fact, Islamic religious authority could be challenged in no other way, and the more extreme sects further acquired a messianic character.

The expectation of deliverance is not, of course, exclusively Islamic. During periods of economic, social, and political discontent men will look to religion as promising happiness in the next world and some comfort in this. It seems that the deeper the discontent the more extreme the message men are willing to accept. On occasions the message can be transformed into an expectation of the Last Day and of the appearance of the Messiah, or in Islam of the *mahdī*. At periods of tension, often under foreign government or because the central authority was weak or corrupt, expectation of the *mahdī* gave comfort to believers. Such expectation may exist all the time, but it can only be given significance at one time and place when an individual arises who claims or who can be given the title of *mahdī*. He can then further his claim if there grows up around him a movement of men who accept him, whose purpose is to place the *mahdī* at the head of the *umma*, and to overthrow the existing ruler. This is the political aim of the movement; a social and economic programme is usually left undefined. The task of the *mahdī* is to restore

the 'true' Islam and to bring in equality and justice, two things the oppressed seek.

Although the belief in the *mahdī* or the 'hidden *imām*' became most widespread among the Shī'a, the Sunnī community none the less reposed certain hopes in the appearance of a leader who would strive to renew Islam. Indeed, it is the title of *mujaddid* (renewer) which is perhaps more appropriate for the expected figure in Sunnī Islam—one who is not necessarily the harbinger of the Last Day but a more humble figure to guide the *umma* back to the right path. Of the leaders of the three movements discussed in this paper, only one, Muḥammad Aḥmad, assumed the title of *mahdī* but he, as a Sunnī, laid no further claim to the qualities of the Shī'i *imām*. Of the others, Muḥammad al-Sanūsī represented the orthodox Ṣūfī trend in North Africa where Ṣūfism had engendered a considerable semi-mahdist expectation and has also had strong political connections, but neither he nor his son claimed to be the *mahdī*.

The three revival movements dealt with here furnish ample proof that in certain fringe areas of the Ottoman Empire, for whatever reasons, there was discontent with the existing conditions of society and that there were men prepared actively to try to reform those conditions. Such movements have been far from rare in Islam; in India an orthodox revival had, almost of necessity, grown up in the seventeenth century to face the political and spiritual problems posed by the Muslim-Hindu imbalance, and possibly¹ the Indian influence permeated to the Middle East. Earlier, the movements in North Africa led by 'Ubayd Allāh al-Mahdī, the founder of the Fāṭimid dynasty, and Ibn Tūmart, the founder of the Almoravid movement, had furnished examples of men claiming the title of *mahdī* and, after leading reform movements, founding states. In the second half of the ninth century with the growing weakness of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate, men began to look elsewhere for the reassurance that a strong central government can provide. The Fāṭimid message that the Islamic *umma* had taken a wrong turn was received eagerly and the Fāṭimid *mahdī* flourished. But very success led to eventual failure, as, having promised the millenium, the Fāṭimids had to compromise with the world to enable them to run a state and the hopes the community had placed in the *mahdī* were not realized. That is the historical dilemma of the successful *mahdī*. He disappoints his followers either by failing to achieve power or having achieved power by being unable to usher in the promised age.

'Ubayd Allah exploited anti-'Abbāsīd feeling, Ibn Tūmart two centuries later was able to utilize anti-Almoravid feeling. By preaching an uncompromising observance of religious obligations and by his

¹ Although at the moment it seems unproved.

learning and piety he found himself the spiritual leader of anti-Almoravid sentiment and in alliance with 'Abd al-Mun'im founded the Almohad state. The idea of proclaiming himself *mahdī* had grown in his mind until he was acclaimed such in 1121. The career of Ibn Tūmart demonstrates a conscious attempt on his part to model his life on that of the Prophet, but he remained, and indeed regarded himself, as a religious reformer. He continued to be Sunnī but adopted the Shī'ī title of 'infallible *imām*'. The burden of his preaching was a return to the original purity of Islam.

Of these two earlier *mahdīs*, one Shī'ī and one Sunnī, it is the latter who is the more relevant to this paper. Ibn Tūmart had begun as an individual fulfilling his religious obligations as he conceived them and urging others to do likewise. His arrival coincided with a period of discontent directed against the central authorities, his qualities were recognized and he was acknowledged leader, or at least spokesman, of like-minded people. This coincidence of leader and cause for protest was repeated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is difficult, and probably fruitless, to try to determine whether conditions summoned forth the man or whether men are always there waiting to respond to the challenge of the day.

The urge to reform and revival was not unified nor did it have a unity of inspiration or direction, but it found expression in the careers of a number of men¹ and the foundation of several organized movements which had the common theme of a return to an Islam purged of heresies and accretions. They arose in societies where religious observations had relaxed or had diverged from 'the orthodox', but it does not follow that the moral laxity of society was directly connected with the decline of the Ottoman Empire (if indeed it is even justified to speak of decline at this period), as Ottoman rule in the three areas under consideration was very tenuous. In Arabia only the Hejaz was under the Empire, the rest of central Arabia being ruled by local dynasties and split among different sects. There was in addition the continuing division between nomads and town dwellers. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's protest was first and foremost against the low state to which religion had sunk. It is not clear that he ascribed this to the lack of a strong central and reforming authority. Certainly the reform he demanded could not have come about in a fragmented society with no central government, but his was more than just a protest against a corrupt Ottoman government.

The founder of the Sanūsiyya, Muḥammad ibn 'Alī, was born in Algeria and only through expediency settled later in Cyrenaica where, in a largely tribal society, the observance of religion had in the eyes of

¹ There were, of course, movements other than the three discussed here.

the reformer reached a very low ebb. Ottoman rule in the 1840s covered only the coastal area and the Sanūsīs made no attempt to oust the Turks. Although they disapproved of the Turkish way of life they co-operated in the administration of Cyrenaica and it is again doubtful whether Muḥammad al-Sanūsī thought in terms of a revolt against the central authority and of replacing it with a Sanūsī state. There was, however, some feeling amongst the tribes of a common hostility towards the Turks which gave solidarity to the Sanūsīyya.

The most clearly defined conditions for protest were in the Sudan where the Turco-Egyptian rule was despised and hated. The administration was formally stronger than the tribal and religious system, but it was far weaker in emotional appeal to the individual Sudanese. Although its officials were criticized by the Mahdists as Turks, the Sudan was not strictly an Ottoman province, but from an early date there was a strong interconnection in the Mahdi's preaching between hatred of a foreign government and a necessary revival of religion. Thus in the Sudan, to the call for a purified Islam was added opposition to outsiders rather different from the kind encountered in Arabia and Cyrenaica.

The most fascinating, and ultimately the most inexplicable, aspect of the study of these revivalist movements is the character of the leaders themselves and the question: what impels men to turn against the established pattern of society and authority, and, in Max Weber's phrase, to lead a 'breakthrough'. There clearly are some men more sensitive to the moral decay of society than others, who are impelled to preach a renewal of faith and, further, to help to implement their preaching. This is the person whom Weber variously defines as prophet, teacher of ethics, or social reformer, a man, a possessor of charisma or *baraka* as a purely individual gift, who receives a personal call either to found a new religion or to renew an existing one. Here the three Muslim leaders fit best into the category of the *mujaddid* who is full of 'a recovered understanding of ancient wisdom', in our case, of a need to return to primitive Islam. Weber cannot, of course, help to identify the psychological urge impelling a man to preach revival, but few would doubt the sincerity of the conviction of Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Muḥammad al-Sanūsī, and Muḥammad Aḥmad in their original religious training. Many men have this conviction, but they went beyond this and by a reputation for piety and learning gained a band of followers. Belief in their *baraka* spread and by a combination of circumstances they or their descendants were able to establish themselves as leaders of a religious movement and then as head or co-head of a theocratic state.

What in religious terms is the reason impelling one of the three leaders to take the leap from being a teacher or even a *mujaddid* to claiming the

title of *mahdī*, a claim that must be backed by revelation? Professor Holt writes that the assumption of the 'mahdship' could only come from inner conviction, and perhaps it is not for us to judge whether this conviction is self-imposed or rather whether the claimant is deluding himself and/or his followers. Muḥammad Aḥmad was a highly strung emotional personality, possibly one liable to visions, but naturally was at pains to refute any charge of self-delusion. He wrote to Sayyid al-Mahdī al-Sanūsī: 'My mahdiism was revealed to me when I was wide awake and in good health. I was not asleep, nor hallucinated, nor drunk with wine, nor mad, but in possession of all my mental faculties.' Once he had gained some acceptance he was able to make the ultimate claim: 'Whosoever does not believe in the Mahdi is an unbeliever in God and Muḥammad.' There was evidently a mahdist expectation abroad in the Sudan which Muḥammad Aḥmad did not create but which he utilized. However, he laid no stress on infallibility (the quality of a Shī'ī *imām*) but, as Holt stresses, found in the title of *mahdī* a legitimate basis for his opposition to the Egyptian administration. He was *mahdī* in the Sunnī sense, yet it was a dangerous title to assume as it aroused expectation among the masses of the golden age to follow. It was, in a sense, the mahdist expectation, the pressure from below which enabled him to assume his title. Perhaps men will always look for the millenium when the present offers little hope. But the man must match the hour; similar pressure was exerted on the son of Muḥammad al-Sanūsī as the tribesmen began to cultivate the myth of his supernatural powers. Despite this pressure he categorically refused to take the title of *mahdī*.

The terms of the protest that the three men used were very similar as their challenge had to be within the concepts of Islam. The obvious method was to appeal to the supreme example, Muḥammad, and to the way the Islamic community was organized in his time. This implied the disruption of the existing society and the reformer was faced with the (perhaps unacknowledged) dilemma of seeking a stable society and yet of having to put his message in terms of completely overthrowing the existing régime. By taking early Muslim history as their pattern the reformers found stress both in the *ḥadīth* and in the example of the Prophet on the concept of *jihād*, which implies an active effort to establish (or re-establish) the true Islamic order. In addition the Sunnī community had existed by emphasizing the maintenance of the consensus, *ijmā'*, and consequently allowing little room for self-criticism. Change, therefore, had often to be achieved through violence. The reformers put themselves beyond the *ijmā'* of obeying even an unrighteous ruler.

All three men had a religious education which turned them towards asceticism, and two of them towards mysticism, although the third, Ibn

'Abd al-Wahhāb, very strongly rejected Ṣūfī teachings. The pattern of the reformers' preaching was similar; modified by local conditions it was a call for a return to the true Islam, accompanied by a call for social and even political reform. Their preaching was positively moral rather than other-worldly. One was more purificationist, one more activist, but the general pattern was the encouragement of religious feeling geared towards the rebuilding of the good and moral society. They saw social decay, political weakness, and believed the remedying of these ills was not possible unless a deeper reform of religious life was undertaken. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb laid stress on the purificationist aspect of his message, Muḥammad al-Sanūsī on strengthening the belief of the Bedouin by organizing their religious and social life, Muḥammad Aḥmad on the activist political aspect of removing foreign rule. All stressed the need for a return to a stronger faith.

The impetus of their preaching led their movements from religious protest into theocratic states. The examples of the Prophet and of *jihād* taught positive participation in changing the state of affairs. This logically followed both by force of circumstances and by the nature of the message. The existing state of affairs was disrupted because the response to the religious message of the reformers led to some necessary organization of the believers. Moreover, the message was that the present state of affairs was unsatisfactory, but, if it were changed, what would take its place? In all three cases the religious message led to the development of a political ideology which led (by widely differing methods) to the establishment of states. Again, early Islam provided the example of religious and moral action leading to the formation of a state.

In the case of the Wahhābiyya it was Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's alliance in 1744 with a local ruler, Muḥammad ibn Su'ūd, which led to the Wahhābī state. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb himself was content to remain counsellor to the ruler, but from the swearing of the pact (*bay'a*) the Wahhābiyya and the Saudi state became inseparable. The pact (to strive by force if necessary in *jihād* to make the Kingdom of the Word of God prevail) marked the true beginning of the Wahhābī state which transformed a small Bedouin amirate into a legally instituted theocracy. Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb continued his activities in the religious and political fields by winning new converts and by remaining political counsellor to Muḥammad ibn Su'ūd and to some extent to his successor, 'Abd al-'Azīz.

The character and personality of the reformer moulded the path his movement took, but of similar importance was the area in which his movement developed. The Wahhābiyya contained within itself more than a strain of older Arab nationalism in its later opposition to the Ottomans. The Sanūsīyya began as a message of renewal by chance in

Cyrenaica, but the movement grew only in intimate connection with the tribal organization of the area. The system of Šūfī *zāwiyas* founded in tribal centres closely linked with the tribal organization led to the strengthening of the Sanūsī movement. There was some hostility towards the Ottomans but there was a more or less explicit agreement that the Ottoman writ ran on the coast while the Sanūsīs were left to their own devices in the interior. It was the later challenge of outside forces, the Italians, which transformed a Šūfī order closely integrated in a tribal structure into a theocracy. The head of the order took the title of *amīr* and was recognized by the Italians as head of a political organization. Later still, Britain negotiated with the *amīr* Idrīs as someone who spoke in a political sense for the whole population of Cyrenaica. Therefore, in British eyes, 'Sanūsī' and 'Cyrenaican' were synonymous terms, and 'Sanūsī' had ceased to have an exclusively religious connotation and had acquired a political one.

The course of the development of the Mahdiyya and of the struggle against the Anglo-Egyptian forces is well known. The Mahdī's message was much more militant from the beginning than that of al-Sanūsī or Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb and his cause was strengthened by military victories. He was primarily a religious leader, but early on there was a close interconnection of religious motives and local political and social grievances. His call to reform was joined with a protest against the Turco-Egyptian administration. On the capture in 1885 of El Obeid, an administrative centre, the Mahdiyya had to start to grapple with administrative problems. By force of circumstance, in the four years between the declaration of the Mahdī and his death, the Mahdiyya had developed from a movement of protest into a militant Islamic theocracy, thus repeating a pattern of such developments but by following its own unique path.

The fact that the three movements were to outlast their founders meant that the problem of succession arose. Very rarely is the founder of a movement followed by one of equal charisma. Often the successor has to seize his position, to rely on the momentum established by the founder, or to stress the continuing stability of the movement rather than its disruptive aspect. In the Wahhābī state neither the founder nor his descendants were rulers and in consequence the issue of the succession was not essential to the existence of the state. It was the ruler himself who took the title of *imām*. However, Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb's descendants did continue his work in alliance with the Saudi dynasty. His grandson, Sulaymān, was equally devoted to the principle of reform and carried opposition to the Ottoman Empire further by forbidding all relations with the Turks. The succession did not change the character of the state, which remained a Wahhābī theocracy.

The problem of the succession in the Sanūsīyya raises a question fundamental to this paper. Muḥammad al-Sanūsī never claimed to be *mahdī*, but for reasons not entirely clear he named his son Sayyid al-Mahdī under whom the Sanūsī movement spread to its greatest extent. From below there was a move to acclaim him *mahdī*; his reputation began to exceed even that of his father. The masses believed in him, but he steadfastly refused to accept the title. He denounced Muḥammad Aḥmad as an imposter and refused his summons to a *jihād*. His answer was that it was his duty 'to reform Islam through peaceful means and not bloodshed'. Of course, the Sanūsī state was later compelled to resort to arms but for defence and not for the propagation of the faith. He believed that the political liberation of Islam had to be preceded by a profound spiritual regeneration. To this end he continued the work of his father both religiously and administratively. Obviously, the growth of the Sanūsī movement owed much to the abilities of Sayyid al-Mahdī, perhaps more as an administrator than as a summoner to revival, and to his descendants who led the struggle against the Italian invader.

From both the Wahhābiyya and the Sanūsīyya there arose a long-lived and stable leadership. The Mahdiyya was a much shorter, more violent outburst. It was a movement nurtured in violence which largely perished in violence. The Mahdi died at the height of his triumph and thus avoided the fate of those claimants to mahdship who succeed at first and yet fail to usher in the promised era. The succession was disputed and seized by a man unrelated to the Mahdi, 'Abdallāhi, who, in his search for legitimacy, had to claim for himself as much as possible the *kudos* of the Mahdi. This he did, not without clashes and the use of terror and by claiming to have seen visions of his appointment and to have received instructions from the dead Mahdi. He made his position secure by the force of arms, favourable circumstances, and clever political judgement. He saw his chief task as transforming the Mahdist vision into a more mundane rule over the Sudan and he was able to establish a functioning administration during the fourteen years of his régime. The Mahdist idea of *jihād* was abandoned and the Khalifa concentrated his attention on internal Sudanese affairs. His reputation has suffered because he failed to repulse the foreign occupier and because the cause of the Mahdiyya died with him. Whereas the Wahhābīs and Sanūsīs met, fought, suffered under, and eventually ousted the foreigner and grew stronger thereby, the Mahdiyya after its initial successes was almost completely destroyed.

Finally, to return to the original question we may try to identify what was general and what specific in the three revivalist movements. They all arose on the fringes of the Ottoman Empire where they did not reap

the benefits of Turkish rule but, perhaps, only the disadvantages, and they all basically rejected Ottoman sovereignty. Society was fragmented and there existed no strong central authority. Religious life had decayed, or in other words had become too popularized and there was no deep tradition of religious learning in the areas where the movements arose. The three men of protest were all inspired with the idea of a return to a primitive unspoiled Islam and both by training and personality were inspired actively to lead a reform movement. They were part of the spirit of reform that was discernible in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Islam. They stressed the social and political aspects of a return to early Islam but saw that social and political reform was possible only after a deeper reform of religion. Their message was universal to be spread, in two cases, by *jihād*. Again, following the example of early Islam, their movements grew into theocracies and into Islamic states under the successors of the founders.

But each movement had its specific features. They were modified by local conditions: the Mahdiyya could have occurred only in the Sudan; the Wahhābiyya was in some ways specifically Arab; the Sanūsiyya adapted itself very clearly to local Cyrenaican tribal conditions. Although the three men had similar messages, the impact was modified by their personalities and only one felt impelled to take the leap from *mujaddid* to *mahdī*. They stressed different aspects of their message; one was more activist, one more purificationist, one organizational. Finally, the methods by which the movements were transformed into states were different; the Mahdiyya by opposition, the Wahhābiyya by an alliance with a dynasty, and the Sanūsiyya by integration and then by opposition.