

THE SECRET CULTS OF ISLAM

BY DUDLEY WRIGHT

SECRET societies and monastic orders, some would have us believe, are unknown in Islam. Certainly among a certain section of Moslems there has always been a strong disinclination to encourage membership of any society or association demanding a vow of secrecy from its members and, in some quarters, even membership of the Masonic order has been forbidden or deprecated because of its supposed opposition to some of the precepts of the Qur-an. That such idea is fallacious is proved by the fact that in India there are Masonic lodges composed entirely of orthodox Moslems, while in England there are Islamic members of lodges who are assiduous equally in the carrying out of their religious duties as they are of their Masonic obligations. In practice, however, almost every Moslem who takes his religion seriously (and that number is legion—greater in proportion to the faithful in any other religion) is a member of some secret religious order or confraternity and performs daily the *Zikr*, or act of devotion peculiar to such association. There is no doubt that monasticism was forbidden by Mohammed. It is stated in the *Traditions* that Usman ibn Mazun came to the Prophet with the request that he might retire from society and become a monk, to which the Prophet made reply: "The retirement which becomes my people is to sit in the corner of a mosque and wait for the time of prayer." According also to the Qur-an (lvii. 27) the Prophet said: "We gave them the gospel and we put into the hearts of those who follow him kindness and compassion; but as to the monastic life, they invented it themselves," thus crediting Christianity with the invention of monasticism, which is an error, it being a pre-Christian institution.

Although the Islamic faith knows nothing of the doctrine of sacrifice, in the general meaning of that term, and has, therefore, no priesthood, the organization of religious orders or societies, demand-

ing a novitiate from aspirants to membership, along with the taking of vows and obligations of secrecy, following a regular ceremony of initiation, has been an established fact right from the days of Mohammed, in whose lifetime one, at least of the twelve original societies was founded. Many have been formed since then; many are in existence in full vigor at the present day. They are, as it were, independent states within the body politic, with constitutions, differing from each other only in trivial points of practice and costume, and may be compared with the orders, congregations, friarhoods, and societies of the Roman Church and, like those bodies, consistently orthodox (at any rate, so far as the majority are concerned) with respect to the articles of their faith and practice. In a few orders, however, beyond the fundamental belief that "There is no God but Allah"—which, by the way, is not maintained in one order—there is the utmost divergence in belief. Even the second portion of the credal sentence: "And Mohammed is His Prophet," finds exception in, at least, two. The Qur-an, the basis of the Islamic faith, has, in circumstances somewhat similar to the Christian Scriptures, been subject to various interpretations and dialectical comments, sometimes genuinely made, but sometimes also, inspired by self-interest, hatred, or ambition. The result in Islam, as in Christianity, has been spiritual chaos, and while, on the one hand, the various religious orders in Islam have played a very active part in the propagation of the faith, they have also played an equally or, perhaps, more important part, not only in politics, but also in the holy wars against Christian nations. Very frequently, too, they have proved hostile to modern civilization and European influence.

Yet, says Sir Edwin Pears, in his *Life of Abdul Hamid*, "the real simple life and spiritual life of Islam is to be found in Turkey among various sects of Dervishes, such as the Mehlevis and the Bektashees. Englishmen generally are unaware how highly developed is their spiritual life. . . . The influence of these two great communities has been a humanizing one on the Moslems of Turkey and it is largely due to the wide dispersion of their members that the spread of Pan-Islamism of an objectionable character entirely failed in the Turkish Empire. The only Pan-Islamic movement which has existed is a purely religious one. The great missionary efforts that Mohammedanism has made in Africa and Asia are not due to a political Pan-Islamism, but to the leaven of the sects mentioned, who understand that if missionary efforts are to succeed they must be made by spiritual and not by temporal forces."

So also G. Bonet-Maury in *L'Islamisme et le Christianisme en Afrique* tells us that it is amongst the Berbers, superficially Islamic, that we see born and developed the societies of Dervishes, or religious brotherhoods, whose distinctive traits are monasticism, voluntary poverty, solitary or conventual life passed in prayer, certain mortifications, and missionary zeal. However, like the ancient military orders, they believed themselves authorized to take up arms to defend their cause.

Whence arose these religious orders and secret societies of Islam? In the opinion of Depont and Coppolani (*Les Confréries Religieuses Musulmanes*) one of the faults eminently prejudicial to the work of Mohammed was undoubtedly the neglect to establish an order of succession in the Caliphate which would have prevented civil dissension, such as was produced in the bosom of some of his most fervent disciples while it might, perhaps, have founded an imperishable monarchy. This, however, is purely hypothetical, because in religion, as in politics, it is very difficult to alter customs, particularly laws, or to suppress the national spirit, and the Islamic edifice, although erected with much care, was not in foundation sufficiently solid to prevent discord from penetrating into the structure.

The official creed of Islam, though brief, is rigid and stationary, and this rigidity is held to be an outstanding virtue. In official Islam there is no place for the visionary, the egoist, who, while holding to the fundamentals of the faith and its practices, would, at the same time, strike out on side lines of his own invention. There is no opportunity for an Islamic Francis, Dominic, or Bernard. Even the Arabic language has preserved its original character and the new words which enriched it as the outcome of the philosophic movement of the Middle Ages have no meaning for the great masses of the people and remain in the lexicon merely as souvenirs of a vanished past.

In his lifetime the great personality of Mohammed dominated the great majority of his followers, and there seems to be no reason for regarding as exaggerated in any way the story of the scene described as taking place on the day he passed away. His death undoubtedly left a void in Islam which it was practically impossible to fill without causing dissension. Some of the believers sought to fill the gap by appointing mediators whose intercession would ensure the granting of their petitions by Allah. What more natural, therefore, than that they should turn to the friends of the Prophet, whom they believed to be possessed of this power, and to whom they gave the name of Walis. They were the first saints of Islam and, true to

the doctrine of development, it was not long before they were accredited with the power of performing miracles. The word *Wali* means "one who is very near," and *Al-Wali*, "the Helper," is one of the ninety-nine attributes of Allah.

It is only a short step from obedience to a living authority to post-mortem adoration, and thus the reverence shown to a Wali when living was continued by way of invocations after his death, and the tombs of the saints became the objects of pilgrimage, generally on the anniversaries of the saints' death. Today the invocation of Walis is generally regarded as a religious duty wherever Oriental Moslems congregate, reminding one of the practices of Catholic hagiolatry, although there are some differences to note:

1. The Wali is not canonized by an ecclesiastical authority, not even by the Shaikh-ul-Islam, but by the voice or vote of the people;
2. He is not venerated in the mosques, which are reserved for the worship of Allah, but in the privacy of the tomb, or in a building erected at the place of interment;
3. No picture, sculpture, or painting is made of the Wali, consequently there is no nimbus or halo to adorn any representation before which Moslems prostrate in prayer.

The form of government is practically alike in all the Islamic orders. At the head of each is the Shaikh, a word which means "Master," "Doctor," "Senior," "Director," or "Guide of the Spiritual Life," and his position may be said to correspond to that of a Grand Master of a Masonic jurisdiction, although the Shaikh has powers far greater than any possessed by any Masonic functionary. The title "Shaikh" is not the sole property of Islam, nor did it originate within that body. It was borne by the chiefs of the pre-Islamic tribes, and it was given to Aus-Begr, the first Caliph. It is a stately qualification and highly prized by all who have the privilege and honor to bear it. The position of a Shaikh is analogous to that of a Pope. He is the spiritual and temporal director of the Order, the spiritual descendant and heir of the founder, thus establishing an apostolic succession. He is regarded by his disciples as being almost omnipotent and omniscient, favored by Allah, the Clement and Merciful, Who has granted to him a portion of His Almighty Power, and made him His intermediary with human beings. In some orders the Shaikh is the direct lineal descendant of the founder and, so far as the members are concerned, he has practically unlimited power. Moreover, he is generally a man of considerable diplomatic skill and so able to exert an influence outside the confines of his order. Often he is regarded as the synthesis of all the virtues and of all

knowledge and even as possessing the power of performing miracles. He recognizes no earthly power, only that of Allah. He is accredited with a perfect knowledge of the Sacred Law and he claims the absolute unquestioning obedience of every member of the brotherhood of which he is the head.

Among his subordinate officers the principal is the Khalifa, whose standing may best be compared with that of a District or Provincial Masonic Grand Master. The Khalifa is the lieutenant of the Shaikh in any country in which the Brotherhood has been established and, as his delegate, is invested with plenipotentiary powers.

Next in order comes the Moqaddim, who, to continue the simile, stands in the position of the Master of a Masonic lodge. The literal meaning of the term is superintendent, front-rank man, prior, or curator. He must exercise faithfully all the instructions sent to him by his Shaikh, whether orally or by letter, for he is his chief's delegate to the rank and file, and to him is entrusted the power of initiating candidates into the order. Each zawiyah, or monastery, is placed in charge of a Moqaddim, and the members are enjoined in the diploma which is handed them on their admission into the order to yield implicit obedience to the Moqaddim and not to enter upon any enterprise without his consent. To the principal brethren in each monastery are assigned certain offices of varying rank. One, the Wasil, is the treasurer, who has charge of the funds and property of the zawiyah. Another, the Raggal, is the bearer of despatches and part of his duty is to summon the members to the various meetings of the order. To another is assigned the office of Guardian of the Threshold, whose care it is to see that none but the regularly initiated gain admission. Other offices are those of precentor, standard bearer, and water carriers, but all offices are eagerly sought after as great honors, and the duties are always performed with the utmost punctiliousness. The rank and file are known by varying names in the different orders, the most common being Okhwan, "Brother"; Ashab, "Companion," and Mureed, "Disciple."

In all Islamic societies the degrees are numerous and, consequently, there are varying degrees of dignity. The Shaikh decides whether and when advancement shall take place. There is no fixed rule for promotion.

It has been thought by some that Freemasonry existed among the Moslems of Constantinople under another name, and, consequently, in other parts of the East. With regard to this, John P. Brown, in his work on *The Dervishes*, published in 1868, says:

“This I do not find to be the case, though, like in most secret fraternities, there may be points of resemblance accidentally. I have had an indirect intercourse with a Mussulman, who asserted that Freemasonry does exist there, and he gave me a list of places in various parts of the Empire in which lodges were held, adding that the Grand Lodge existed on the Lake of Tiberias, in Palestine, whither it had been taken after the destruction of Jerusalem. It must, therefore, have existed and does still exist among the Jews. I regret to have to state that, notwithstanding all my researches to verify this declaration, I have not found any trace of the fact on which I could rely. My opportunities of inquiring here (Constantinople) have been numerous, and my desire to meet with brethren among Mussulmans led me to use all proper zeal in the pursuit of this desirable object. Others may, perhaps, meet with more success. The title by which it is said Mussulman Freemasons are known is Melameeyson.”

In certain orders the officers and disciples all live within the walls of the zawiyah, in which case there is a further rank, known as Associates, or lay brothers, who are regularly initiated, but live outside, attending all the meetings of the order, and are in possession of the secret signs and passwords, by means of which they can claim the protection of any brethren of the order.

At least once in every year the heads of all the monasteries assemble in conference under the presidency of the Kalifa, who examines the financial condition of each zawiyah, reads any communication or passes on any instruction received from the Shaikh. Sometimes the Shaikh himself presides, when he blesses numbers of charms or amulets, which are after sold to the disciples. On returning home each Moqaddim calls a meeting or synod of his zawiyah, this synod being known as Jalal, when he entertains the brethren at a feast and relates to them all that has taken place.