

IRAN AND SHI'ISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Mar 20, 2020

Again I prefer to present the impartial studied views of a learned scholar which I found in *The World of Islam, Faith, People and Culture*, edited by Bernard Lewis, Thames and Hudson, London, 1992):

Iranian contribution to Islam religion and philosophy.

Islam, in its purest, early Arabian, form, was a rather stark and bare type of monotheism. When the Arabs conquered Iran in the 7th century, Islam came into contact, not only with the ancient Iranian dualist religion, Zoroastrianism, but also with the 'dark, rich flood' of ancient Iranian culture. In Sunni Islam, the (religious) law soon came to exceed theology in importance, and the subtle speculate Iranian mind could not be satisfied by the arid disputes of the Islamic jurisprudence. When Islamic theology became involved, for instance, in endless debates on the question of free will versus predestination, the Persian mind grasped the possibility that 'opposites are merely the obverse and reverse of the Divine Mind'. In giving this mystical solution to a theological problem, the Persians demonstrated the extent to which mysticism had permeated their understanding and interpretation of the Islamic faith. Islamic mysticism, or Sufism, has been called the supreme manifestation of the Persian mind in the religious sphere; although it is true that not all Islamic mystics were Persians, it is also true that neither the Arabs, the Turks nor Indian Muslims produced mystics of the stature of the Persians Sana'i, Nizami, Jalil ad-Din Rumi, al-Ochizali and Hafiz. The story of Islamic mysticism as a whole has been described by Professor Meiser in Chapter IV.

If the development of Sufism within Islam to the period at which it became virtually a religion within a religion was largely the work of Persians, the divorce of Shi'ism from its purely political, Arab, origins and its development into the official religion of the Iranian state is a purely Persian phenomenon. Initially, Shi'ism provided Persians with a means of expressing their feelings of frustration and discontent under Arab rule. Later, under Turkish and Mogol rule, when official Sunnism was tied closely to the interests of the rulers, Shi'ism became associated with numerous movements directed against the established order.

Iranians adopted the legend that 'Ali's younger son, Hysayn, married a daughter of the last Sassanian king, Yazdigird III. When Hysayn was killed at Karbala by the troops of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, Shi'ism

acquired a martyr-figure with a powerful and lasting emotive effect. The events connected with the death of Hysayn were, and still are, commemorated by mourning processions and the performance of passion plays called *ta'ziya*. A few lines from 19th century threnody on the martyrdom of Hysayn may give, even in translation (by E.G. Browne), some idea of the emotive effect of these performances:

Was he slain unthirsting? No! Did none give him a drink? They did!

Who? Shimr! From what source? From the source of Death!

Was he an innocent martyr? Yes! Had he committed any fault? No!

What was his work? Guidance! Who was his friend? God!

Who wrought this wrong? Yazid! Who is this Yazid?

One of the children of Hind! By whom? By bastard origin!

During the periods when Iran was dominated by foreign powers, the performance of the passion plays had a cathartic effect. In 1501, when Shah Isma'il I established the Safavid dynasty, he made Shi'ism the official religion of the new state, and so satisfied the latent nationalist aspirations for which Shi'ism had been the medium of expression for eight and a half centuries.

Through the medium of Shi'ism, the Persians introduced into Islam certain theological concepts and dogmas which were absent from Sunni Islam; of these the most distinctive is the doctrine of the imamate. The function of the Shi'i imam should not be confused with that of the Sunni imam, who technically is simply the elder of the Muslim community in the congregational prayers in the mosque. The Shi'i imams, on the other hand, possess the pre-eminent prerogatives of being the witnesses and interpreters of the revelation, and are the sole repositories of all truth and knowledge. They are distinguished by two special characteristics which have no parallel in Suni Islam. The first is the doctrine of intercession, and the redemptive nature of the death and suffering of the imams. The second is the doctrine of the sinlessness, or infallibility of the imams,¹ and I aspire to write more about the impact of ancient Iran on Shi'ism but these views are in harmony with what I know.

1 Lewis, op. cit. p. 250.