

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 NINE

SACRIFICE AND BLOOD-COVENANTS

IT has been stated that “Islam has no sacraments, no body of specially trained or consecrated men set aside for sacerdotal functions. There is no ecumenical head of Islam, there are no holy orders, no intermediaries.” 62

Such generalizations are, however, as we have already seen, inaccurate.

The sacerdotal function *par excellence* in all religions is that of blood-sacrifice. Abraham was a priest to his household and sacrificed. Melchisedec was a priest of the most High without special consecration. So among the Semites the patriarch was priest. Among the Arabs we also find blood-sacrifice as a household rite before Islam and in Islam; and the great festival, the Feast-of-Sacrifice was consecrated and perpetuated by Mohammed at Mecca when he acted as priest-prophet for his followers. There are six words used in the Mohammedan religion to express the idea of sacrifice.

Zabh, used in the Koran (5:4) for Abraham’s sacrifice of his son.

Qurban, this word occurs three times in the Koran. In two places (3:179; 5:30) it obviously means an offering or sacrifice; in the third passage (46:27) the meaning is obscure. In Christian-Arabic the word signifies the Eucharist.

The *Lisan* dictionary gives two striking traditions: “The characteristics of the Moslem community lie in the fact that their *qurban* is their blood,” i.e., those who died in *jihad* as martyrs. And the other: “The daily prayer is the *qurban* of every pious man.” This same word, however, is used in Persia and India for the sacrifice at the great festival, ‘*Id-i-Qurban*’.

Nahr, to cut the jugular vein, is used in the Koran (108:1-2) in a command to the prophet to sacrifice a camel.

Udhiya, is the word used in Moslem tradition for the annual sacrifice at Mecca (Mishkat Bk. IV, ch. 19).

Hady occurs four times in the Koran for animal victims sent to Mecca when the pilgrim is not able to be in time himself for the sacrifice, (2:193 and 5:2, 96, 98). It signifies a present.

Finally, is the word *mansahji* (Koran 22: 35). “We have appointed to every nation a rite!” “Show us our rites.” The commentator, Baidhawi, explains this as sacrifice (*Tajsir*, p. 91).

There are two main occasions when Islam enjoins a blood-sacrifice, namely, at the birth of a child (*‘aqiqa*), and at the annual feast in Mecca and also in every Moslem community. The first is a sacrament of initiation, like Christian baptism. The second is commemorative like the Eucharist is in part. Yet both have features and prayers which seem both expiatory and vicarious.

Elsewhere I have given a full account of the *‘aqiqa* sacrifice. 63

It will suffice here to say that it consists in shaving the head of the new-born child, killing a sheep or goat as sacrifice no bone of which may be broken, and offering this prayer: “O God, here is the *‘aqiqa* for my son (giving the name), its blood for his blood, its flesh for his flesh, its hair for his hair and save my son from the fire, etc.”

The full prayer is given by Westermarck. 64

Doughty states that this sacrifice is the most common of Islamic religious ceremonies in the Arabian Desert. It may be derived from Arabian paganism but it has Jewish features and, in parts of the Moslem world, the sacrificer is not the father of the child but the *mullah* or *imam*. This is especially true in Morocco.

The great Feast of Sacrifice in the world of Islam is annually celebrated to commemorate Abraham’s faith in willingness to sacrifice his son. That was Mohammed’s explanation of the ancient pagan ritual which he perpetuated. The details of this annual celebration at Mecca have been described by Burckhardt, Burton, and later travelers.

The whole ceremony is based on the injunction of the Koran (22:33-38). It includes prayers, a brief exhortation, the killing of the sheep, goat, camel, or other clean animal, a feast on the sacrifice, ablution, and shaving of the hair. Although the sacrifice can be made by any male Moslem, the religious part of the festival is always in charge of an *imam* and is conducted in a *mussala* or special area set apart for prayer on this occasion (Wensinck on *Festival, Victims, and Mussala*). Everywhere the head of the sacrificial victim must be turned toward the Ka’ba.

Edmond Doutte and Westermarck have written extensively on this feast of sacrifice and other blood-sacrifices common among Moslems of North Africa and in Islam generally. There are such sacrifices at laying foundations of a house, launching a ship, in time of epidemic, to fulfill a vow or to atone for some omission in the ritual of Islam. The idea of expiation and the sanctity of the sacrificer when he officiates are so evident that Doutte, a Roman Catholic, closes his chapter with this observation: “With us the sacrifice of the Mass renews every day this expiation and the Church defines justification as the application of the merits of the sufferings of Jesus Christ to the sinner. Moslems have not reached that far. The idea of redemption has not penetrated their thought as it has Christian thought. But we have told enough to show the great importance of the idea of sacrifice in the development of their dogma in this respect.” (*Magie et Religion*, p. 495).

Westermarck tells of blood-sacrifices made at the tombs of saints to secure their intercession; to the sea for a safe voyage; at the eclipse of the sun or moon; on the threshing-floor to bless the harvest; on taking a solemn oath; or even to consecrate a new market place in a village. 65

He also gives traditions and practices regarding the expiatory value of the blood shed at the annual animal-sacrifice feast.

In Egypt it is common among the peasants to make votive sacrifices at the tombs of sheikhs. For instance, a man makes a vow (*nedr*) that, if he recovers from a sickness, or obtain a son, or any other specific object of desire, he will give to a certain sheikh (deceased) a goat or a lamb; if he attain his object, he sacrifices the animal which he has vowed at the tomb of the sheikh and makes a feast with its meat for any persons who may choose to attend. Having given the animal to the saint, he thus gives to the latter the expiatory merit of feeding the poor. Little kids are often vowed as future sacrifices; and have the right ear slit, or are marked in some other way for this purpose. 66

In North Africa at Andjra, Westermarck relates that while the *faqih* (priest-mullah) is performing the sacrifice a scribe carries a pot of benzoin incense around the sheep to keep off evil spirits during the rite. It is only after the *imam* of the village has cut the throat of his victim that the congregation can follow his example and sacrifice. This is also the order of procedure in other lands where a gun is fired as signal that the *imam* has done so. 67

Yet we are told that there is no “priesthood” and no expiatory sacrifice in Islam!

The priest, as in patriarchal days, is the father of the household. But in the prayer-service, the circumcision-rite, at the annual feast, it is the *imam* or *faqih* who “stands before” (*imam*) and does all these things first, as head of the household of true believers. A woman never sacrifices in Islam on these occasions.

62. George Stewart, “Is the Caliph a Pope?” *Moslem World*, Vol. xxi, p. 187. So also others as quoted in Chapter 1.

63. *The Influence of Animism on Islam*, pp. 87-103.

64. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, Vol. II, pp. 387-397. Whoever it be that pronounces such a prayer, father *imam* or *mullah*, is *ipso facto* a priest. The exact words of this prayer are also given in Herklot’s *Qanoon-i-Islam*, London, 1832, p. 30.

65 *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, Vol. I, pp.70-90; 554-559, 568, etc. Similar sacrifices are common in Arabia and in Lower Egypt.

66. Lane’s *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*, p. 245.

67. *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, Vol. II, pp. 117-127.

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