ORTHODOXY AND HETERO DOXY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SHI’ISM: THE CASES OF SHAYKHISM AND BABISM*

Discussions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy often presuppose a dichotomy of major proportions. In reality, things are never so simple: relations between opposing viewpoints are characterized by dynamism rather than static confrontation. In a sense, heterodox movements may often be no more than extreme expressions of orthodox values.

In the case of Islam, the most extreme expression of an “orthodox” versus “heterodox” antagonism is provided by the emergence of Baha’ism as a distinct religion from an originally orthodox Shi’i matrix. An examination of the antecedents of Baha’ism in the nineteenth century—Shaykhism and Babism—shows the ways in which heterodoxy was, in a sense, a development of orthodox belief, rather than an aberration.

Most discussions of orthodoxy and heterodoxy—whether of the concepts in general or of specific examples—presuppose an actual or supposed dichotomy of serious proportions. The terms used—“orthodoxy” and “heterodoxy,” “church” and “sect,” “official” and “unofficial”—state or imply a fully fledged contradiction that is by its very nature ineligible for compromise. Such terminology merely echoes or reproduces that of the religious world itself: “saved” and “damned,” “true” and “false,” “orthodox” and “heretical,” “ecclesia” and “extra ecclesiam,” “īmān” and “kufr,” “dār al-islām” and “dār al-kufr,” “firqa nājiyya” and “firqa muḍilla.”¹

At times, such dichotomizing seems to correspond to Durkheim’s distinction between “sacred” and “profane,” the heterogeneity of which he describes as “absolute”: “In all the history of human thought there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated

---


¹ An extremely useful sociological dichotomization is provided by Liston Pope in his formulation of twenty-one indices to measure the development that occurs when a sect becomes a church (see L. Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* [New Haven, 1942], and a summary of his twenty-one indices in Michael Hill, *A Sociology of Religion* [London, 1973], 65–66).
or so radically opposed to one another.”\textsuperscript{2} From the viewpoint of the Church, the sect has passed outside the realm of the sacred into that of the profane: \textit{extra ecclesiam nulla salus}, or else it has infringed on sacred space and profaned it; for the sect, the reverse is true, in that the Church has desacralized itself by effecting a compromise with the world. As Becker expresses it, the religious values of the Church clash with those derived from the social sphere, these two sets of values being “wholly alien to each other and often directly opposed.”\textsuperscript{3} The Church, in a sense, attempts to fuse the sacred and the profane, and is seen as failing in this endeavour by those who reject it.

This apparent link between the orthodox-heterodox dichotomy and that drawn by Durkheim between sacred and profane is further reinforced by the work of the American sociologist Peter Berger, who has defined the sect as “a religious grouping based on the belief that the spirit is immediately present” and the church as “a religious grouping based on the belief that the spirit is remote.”\textsuperscript{4} Berger links this division of things to Weber’s theory of charismatic routinization: with the breakthrough of fresh charisma, the spirit is brought close, but as the charisma becomes routinized the sect takes on more worldly characteristics and becomes a church whose structure and methods presuppose a distancing of the spirit.

In reality, of course, no sociologist would ever imply that the dichotomy is so absolute—or, rather, that there is only dichotomy in the situation. If the irruption of charisma is often abrupt, the process of routinization is more measured. Between sect and church lies a broad spectrum of attitudes and structures; dynamism rather than static confrontation informs the process whereby the ends of the spectrum join up. The symbiosis of more than one form of religiosity within a single cultural or religious system is widely recognized. This may be seen at its broadest in multiple affiliation (as in Japan or China), more narrowly in the co-existence of Great and Little Traditions or in syncretism, and at its most organized in the Christian concept of the ecclesiola in ecclesia or the Islamic \textit{ikhtilāf al-madhāhib}.

\textsuperscript{2} Emile Durkheim, \textit{The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life}, 38.
\textsuperscript{3} Howard Becker, \textit{Systematic Sociology…of Leopold von Weiss} (New York, 1932), 617.