1 Introduction

The idea of the continuation of prophecy after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, present in several currents in Islam, in particular Shi‘ism and Sufism, implies that the link with the source of prophetic knowledge is not severed after the last prophetic mission, and can be potentially re-actualized at any point in history.¹ On the opposite end of the spectrum, this point of view confronted the rigorously dogmatic approach, according to which the gate of revelation was completely closed after Muḥammad’s mission, and from this point on the Muslim community was defined by conformity to a dogma, i.e., to the *sunna* based on the Qur‘ān and the carefully selected material of the tradition transmitted from generation to generation.

Of course, a division of all the currents existing within the Muslim community into two mutually opposed categories, the “continuation of the prophecy” trend and the “tradition-based dogma”, would be a rough oversimplification. Each of these categories includes a broad spectrum of groups and movements. The boundaries between the two categories are blurred and can at best be defined locally, with reference to the particular historical context. Both categories existed within the Sunnī as well as the Shi‘ī branches of Islam. Their outright identification with “centrifugal” and “centripetal” tendencies would also be wrong, because many of the “continuation of prophecy” movements and thinkers often did not aim at the destruction of the “dogma”, but at what they understood as its reconstruction and reinforcement.²

¹ For the various aspects and forms of the idea of the continuation of prophecy in Islam see the substantial overview in Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous*, pp. 49–101.
² For the definitions, formation, mutual relationships, and historical evolution of the “majority dogma” and “other” trends in Islam see the fundamental study of van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*; in particular, on the complexity, flexibility and relativity of the concepts describing the Muslim community as a whole and the “heresies”, including the extreme case of *takfīr*, see ibid., vol. 2, pp. 1269ff. For further reflection on this topic see Mir-Kasimov, “Introduction”.
A wide class of the messianic, or “mahdist” movements can arguably be characterized as a particular case of the “continuation of prophecy” paradigm. In this case, the idea of the continuous link with the source of prophetic inspiration is associated with beliefs concerning either the millennial “renovator” or the eschatological Saviour. Many messianic leaders claimed indeed to have received—directly or by the intermediary of an eminent figure of the past, such as the Prophet himself, an Imām or perfect spiritual master—specific and authentic knowledge, which would confer upon them a religious authority far above any dogma or law based on textual transmission. This charismatic authority was used to legitimize possible modifications, reforms or interpretations of the established norm, as well as the doctrinal positions on which these modifications were based.

As long as the groups belonging to the moderate part of the spectrum of the “continuation of prophecy” tendency, including both the Shi‘ī and Sufi branches of Islamic mysticism, did not put forward their specific doctrinal positions and views too radically, they could come to be more or less tolerated by the official religious authorities. But in the case of messianic movements, the combination of “dissident” and reformist ideas with the millennial or eschatological thrust was often explosive, because it entailed an active political struggle for social reform and for the actual realization of messianic ideals. This led to open confrontation with the established religious authorities, who usually fought back by qualifying the messianic doctrines and claims as “illegitimate innovation” (bidʿa). It was arguably not just, and not so much, the theological and doctrinal controversies, but most of all their active social and political involvement that made the messianic groups and movements a

3 The Arabic word mahdī, “the rightly guided one”, has a broad scope of meanings in the Islamic religious context, including that of renovator or saviour, either in the middle of the historical time or at its end. The word masiḥ, literally “Messiah”, refers in Islam essentially to Jesus, who is also one of the central figures of Islamic eschatology, sometimes identified with the Mahdi in his role as the eschatological saviour. However, neither Jewish nor Christian conceptions of messianism cover exactly the same semantic field as the Islamic one. In order to highlight this difference, the term “mahdism” is often used in scholarly literature with reference to Islamic messianism. I use the words “messianism” and “messianic” in this article while keeping in mind their specific meaning in the Islamic context.

4 For a systematic overview of the wealth of Islamic traditional eschatological material see Cook, Studies.

5 For examples of messianic movements in Islam, see an excellent collection of case studies in the collective volume edited by García-Arenal, Mahdisme.

6 “Großzügigkeit und Aufgeschlossenheit des Traditionalismus,” as Johann Fück puts it in “Die Rolle des Traditionalismus,” p. 27.