Ghulām Aḥmad al-Qādiyānī: The Messiah of the Christians—Peace upon Him—in India (India, 1908)

Introduction

*Jesus Died in India—Qādiyānī and Muslim-Christian Controversies about Eschatology*

Hardly any Islamic reform movement has been more challenging to Muslims and Christians alike than the Aḥmadiyya movement, founded by Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad Qādiyānī (1835–1908) in British India. His eschatological teachings and claims provoked harsh criticism from Muslim and Christian scholars. His interpretation of the second coming of Jesus (ʿĪsā Ibn Maryam) was the object of fierce debates with Christian missionaries. Dissent between the Aḥmadiyya and other Muslim groups even led to violent riots against members of the movement in Lahore in 1953, culminating in the official exclusion of the Aḥmadiyya from Islam by the government and National Assembly of Pakistan in 1974. Until today, Ahmadis are facing persecution and violence, especially in Pakistan and Bangladesh. In the following, Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad’s theological views on Jesus are highlighted, and it will be explained why the Aḥmadiyya became a target of criticism for both Muslims and Christians.

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Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad's Early Career

Mīrzā Ghulām Aḥmad was born in Qadian, Punjab, in 1835. His family claimed descent from the Mughal Emperors of India and belonged to the landholders of the Punjab. Although a considerable part of the family property was seized first by the Sikh rulers of the Punjab and later by the British, Ghulām Aḥmad grew up under wealthy conditions. After his father’s death in 1876, Ghulām Aḥmad started his public career as a preacher. He entered some public debates with various Christian and Hindu religious leaders, trying to prove Islam’s superiority over all other religions. For the same reason, he wrote his first book in 1880, called Barāhīn-i Aḥmadiyya (Proofs of the Aḥmadiyya), which was well-received even among those Muslim scholars who later heavily criticised Ghulām Aḥmad. In 1882, conflicts with some Muslim scholars evolved after Ghulām Aḥmad had announced that he received a divine inspiration declaring him to be a ‘renewer of the faith’ (mujaddid). This claim refers to a famous Prophetic Tradition (hadith), according to which God will send someone at the end of each Islamic century who will renew his religion.4 Ghulām Aḥmad’s writings gained a clear eschatological turn with the advent of the Islamic year 1300 H (thirteenth of November, 1882) and the approach of the year 1900 CE (twenty-eighth of Sha‘bān 1317 H).

Mainstream Islam’s Views on the Last Hour

In Sunni Islam, the subject of eschatology is of high importance.5 Both Quran and hadith are full of descriptions of the Last Hour. Eschatological teachings have always received a fresh impetus shortly before any turn of the century—interestingly, this can be applied both to the Islamic (hijrī) and the Gregorian calendar. Another important date was the turn of the first Islamic millennium, corresponding to the nineteenth of October 1591.

One book on this topic in particular became extremely influential throughout the Islamic world, namely al-Ishāʿa li-ashrāṭ al-sāʿa (The Propagation of the Conditions of the Last Hour) written by al-Barzanjī (d. 1691). According to

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4 Muslim scholars have intensively discussed the question to whom the title of a mujaddid might be attributed. Throughout the centuries, lists with different names of such renewers were compiled. In the nineteenth century, almost every Indian Muslim reformist group proclaimed its own mujaddid. See E. van Donzel, “Mudjaddid,” Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2008, Print; Brill Online, 2012, Online); Preckel, Islamische Bildungsnetzwerke, 371–388; Friedmann, Prophecy Continuous, 94–101.